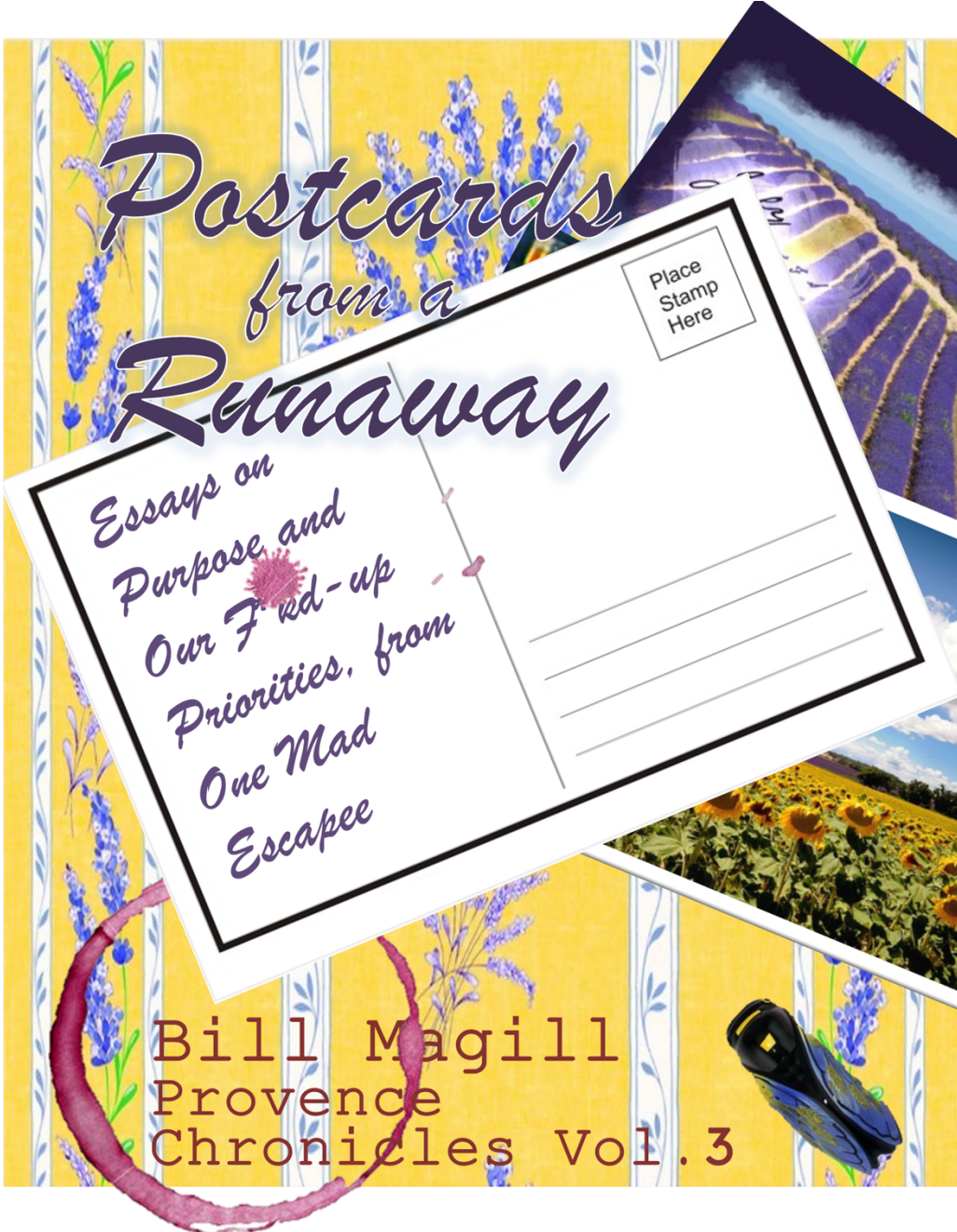


Postcards from a Runaway

Essays on
Purpose and
Our Fried-up
Priorities, from
One Mad
Escapee

Place
Stamp
Here

Bill Magill
Provence
Chronicles Vol. 3



Postcards from a Runaway

Essays on purpose and our fkd-up priorities, by one mad escapee.

Provence Chronicles
Volume 3
2017-2024

Bill Magill

Postcards Drawer

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Forward

Have you imagined running away from it all; away from the job, spouse, mortgage, from all the commitments and trappings (trap being the key syllable) of your predictable existence, and losing yourself in a secluded village on the Amalfi coast or Greek island? Maybe you open a small café or learn to paint. Mornings are late, served on the sea-facing balcony with croissants and a rich espresso. Afternoons are dressed in cool white linen, shaded from the high sun in your workshop atelier, shutters drawn and brush in hand. Warm evenings are shared with a beautiful new friend, half your age and twice as wise, over simple bowls of steamed mussels, crusty bread, and bottles of chilled rosé. He or she is helping you learn the language and certain other local customs, shared late in your room and cooled by a soft Mediterranean breeze.

At age 50 I parted Silicon Valley for the lavender fields and turquoise sea of the south of France. In a toast to the reckless bolt I left behind all possessions, obligations, and emotional entanglements; away from a life of adult expectations and convention to seek out the deep end in the pool of meaning. My strategy was a simple 2 steps: (1) just go, and (2) figure it out when you get there.

A big step 3 soon joined the list: self-therapy administered through a diary of my days. The plume was to be my brush and Aix-en-Provence – the Cezanne city of fountains and art – the elegant setting. *Postcards from a Runaway* was created as public airing of my personal irresponsibility, thoughts and observations on what really matters in life, and lessons learned along the way. It was meant to challenge the orthodoxy of our adult principles on career, commitment, and compromise; the compliance that bounds what is possible in this miracle we call life.

This Volume 3 of *Postcards*, written between 2017 and 2024, is the third collection compiled and reissued. The novelty of reinvention in a strange new land yielded to a deeper appreciation of Provence as home. Good friends come and go, intimacies flower and fade, lockdowns endure, ... and it remains to me the most beautiful spot on this planet to just let life happen. The turbulence of radical change – in where I lived, what I did, and whom I loved – provoked a wave of creative inspiration that resulted in a new album (2018), musical (2020), and EP (2024). Reflections on all of this and much more are recorded in the essays herein. I hope you enjoy them.

Note that each *postcard* commences with music and drink suggestions that complement the essay's theme. To enjoy these pieces most fully, consider starting with the drink (I am happy to serve as excuse for your first evening cocktail), putting on the music (most can be accessed without charge through YouTube), then on to paragraph 1.

Happy continuation,

Bill

The Merits of Madness

Suggested Song: [Mad](#), Bill Magill

Suggested Drink: [Mango Madness](#) cocktail: Cointreau, lime juice, mango juice, mezcal.

“Madness is close to everybody.”

- Carol Rama

I decided to take a gap year when I reached 50, to rediscover the world around, to reassess the man within. That year bled into a decade of exploration, an end to a marriage, a change in career ambitions, and a move across the globe. I sought out alternative beliefs and states of being, how to create, how to eat, how to love, how to live. Those first 50 years had brought me security, certainty, and predictability; things that kept me well anchored in a safe harbor. That all changed.

I’ve gotten to know the stranger within much better these past years in Provence. I came looking for an authentic life, a daily quotidian more genuine and rich than I could afford in the tech and investments worlds of Silicon Valley. And by afford I don’t mean with money. You cannot buy genuine. All the treasure of Zuckerberg and Gates and Bezos cannot buy genuine. You find it in the people who love you, the dreams that seduce you, and the enchanted places that complement your own rhythms and energy.



I’ve learned that *Easy Street* is not my address of envy. *Passion Avenue* is where I look to squat. This can be a difficult neighborhood, noisy at times, unstable, brilliantly sunny then ominously dark, rarely dull. Unpredictable lovers, impossible dreams, and impractical locales are what arouse my emotions. And aren’t emotions fully aroused the essence of a rich life?

I also value a good drink with trusted friends.

Madness

The weekends of my youth were spent with buddies wrenching on our cars, racing at the strip or on the streets. You had this keen and uneasy sense when your hopped-up, bored-out, over-torqued muscle motor was about to blow. It would roar down that last quarter mile run like a wild banshee, pushing your aggressive assemblage of custom painted steel and polished chrome seconds faster than ever

before, gear after gear, eerily so. And then, in a scream of twisting rods and scorching valves, all of that mighty horsepower would explode in a crescendo of oil and fuel and flame.

You knew the risk but still pushed it hard. It was a mad drive to that wild edge. And at my point in life, again, ... this is where I choose to live.

Time

Time is elemental. Quality time. Time spent with people who forgive (and perhaps even appreciate) your madness, doing things that define it, in places that provoke it. More time is more important than more possessions. Possessions are the enemy, actually. They require investment, maintenance, and energy; have to be placed or stored; and apply a brake on our ability to move quickly, to be fleet and flexible.



The Kiss, Gustav Klimt

Is there someone, something, or some place that you are mad enough about to pay for with time? Two years cropped from the end of your life for one more with them now, doing that, or living there? Four fewer final years for 2 now? We would all pay for more time if we had the money, because money is a worthless, limitless currency. But time, now that's a precious exchange in the extreme.

It's a hypothetical question of course, but worth considering. For if you have no one or nothing worth sacrificing your precious stores of time for, are you living a passionate life? Is it important to live a life of

passion? I'm provoking, yes, but not leading with an answer. If you knew you would die in a year would you want the next 12 months to be mad and full of unpredictable passion, or choose comfort and security? It *is* very possible that you could die in year, in a month, or in week, so this particular question is not hypothetical. Right?

I want to know what my readers thinks about the merits of a mad life. I love to preach – my Scots-Irish grandfather was a fire and brimstone healer of the unholy, so please excuse the genetics – but I am sure of nothing except my own convictions. And I am immensely curious about your own.

Postscript (2017): This essay is dedicated to a close friend who, at 64, has suddenly found himself unmoored and adrift in an unpredictable sea of life possibilities. Where he will be and what he will doing in the next months and years; it's all green field territory. He is a true pirate and has provoked me to question much about my own priorities and ambitions over these past years. A toast to you, Dada. One of a mad kind.

Post-postscript (2024): This marvel of a man is flourishing.

Published initially on September 9, 2017.

The Human Touch

Suggested Song: [The Human Touch](#), Bruce Springsteen

Suggested Drink: [Communion cocktail](#): vodka, grape juice.

It was billed as “The World’s Biggest Eye Contact Experiment,” and the local version of the event was held in a large grassy park in my hometown of Aix-en-Provence. This is what happened. I arrived soon after lunch to find 3 dozen or so people already paired up, sitting on cushions and facing one another, relaxed and concentrating on their partner’s eyes, and not uttering a peep. This trance would hold for a few minutes, then after warm smiles and a short debrief they would part and seek out someone new, ... someone like me.



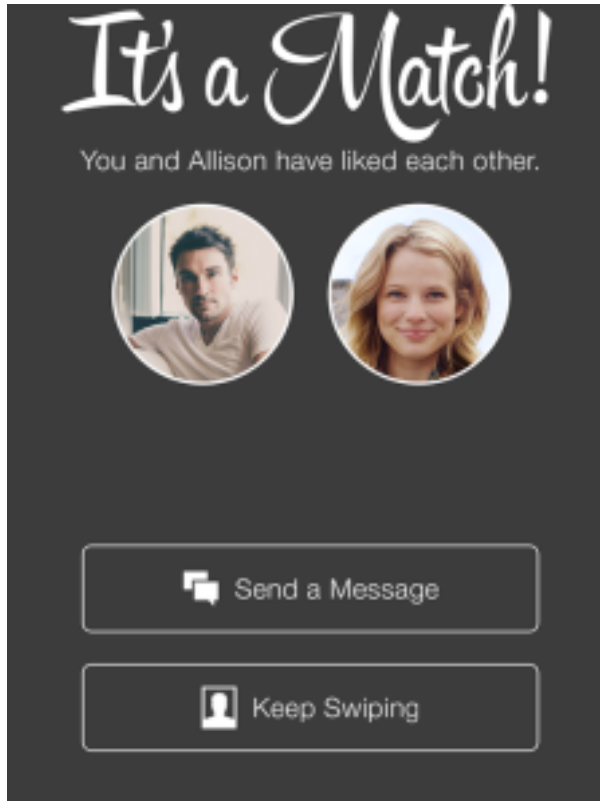
Fixing on a stranger’s eyes for a sustained moment without conversing is an intense, slightly disconcerting experience at first. Nicolas was my initial victim. I’ve never fixed on another man’s eyes for 2 minutes in silence. What should I be expressing and how do I do that without uttering a sound? It’s the opposite of mindfulness. You’re not focused internally on breath and body, you’re connecting externally and personally, and there is an odd intimacy that is unavoidable. The mind searches for the appropriate decorum. How to convey empathy but not attraction with only my gaze?

Lily was next. She was a different person of course and the opposite gender, and I was now experienced (*as Jimi would say*). I was curious to see if that changed things, started to relax, and could lock eyes without overthinking my presence and demeanor. From Nicolas I received a gentle vibe of curiosity and outreach, and with Lily it was a simple acceptance. *Here I am facing you. There is nothing more important at this very moment than our simple bond. We are going to just connect in silence and relax, ... friendly smile.*

I sat with a few more people before leaving. Each exchange was unique and quietly profound, and required a moment to reflect and recompose before moving on to someone new. The point of this event, held that day in dozens of cities across the globe, was to appreciate afresh the wonders of genuine human connection. Not through a carefully manicured iPhone photo or social media stream,

but across a naked space of perhaps 3 feet, separating you from a stranger offering 100% of their attention, deeply, for a few minutes. Beautiful.

The Need for Speed



I have a few friends who use Tinder. I've gotten the demo: the *wow Bill, the check this one out*, their swipe, the immediate response and plans for an evening dalliance. It's an ultimate end to the trend in speed and effortlessness that has taken root these past many years. Why spend time in the kitchen when gourmet options are available in your frozen section? Why learn to play a guitar with real strings when you can be the next Slash with *Guitar Hero*? Why learn to commune with friends in person when you can socialize over the phone, still in your boxers at home? And why learn to love when sex is available with the ease of a swipe?

Am I showing my age when I say that this leaves me more than a little sad, ... and confused? What don't people get? The joy of cooking is more than a classic recipe book. Art offers even more to the creator than the consumer. The beauty of friendship is most deeply enjoyed elbow to elbow

(and glass to glass!), ... without ringtones. And love, well the gulf between sex and love is as wide as the ocean is deep. It's like comparing a Big Mac to the Colors, Textures & Flavors course at Restaurant Guy Savoy in Paris.

Personally, I shoot for the human touch trifecta by inviting good friends for long dinners prepared throughout the afternoon in my modest kitchen. And for this they get a proper torturing after dessert with a few new songs on my trusty guitar or piano. Food, friends, music, perfecto!

Life is short. Why rush through it? Dive deep and linger over what you create, when you connect, and whom you love.

For more on the "The World's Biggest Eye Contact Experiment" [click here](#).

Published initially on October 15, 2017.

Of Toasts and Something Deeper

Suggested Song: [Wall of Death](#), Richard & Linda Thompson

Suggested Drink: a frothy pint of Guinness Stout. Let the toasts begin.

I was in Nashville last week for a funeral and had been invited to say a few words on behalf of my family. This kind of duty can make people squirm. To be honest I don't mind it. It provides a rare chance to reconnect with that soulful raconteur within, a genetic companion from my paternal grandfather, who was a Scots-Irish preacher of the good word.



Toasts spill out with ease, but eulogies can be tough to get right when the material is thin. This was not the case in Nashville. In fact my challenge was less what to say and more what to leave out. For my oldest sister had suddenly departed from a life of beautiful breadth and depth. She was a traveler and seeker, a generous giver and curious student, strong when strength was needed, vulnerable when our own failings were being shared.

Life is short, so enjoy it now.

This popular call to *carpe diem* (paraphrasing a line from Shakespeare) always gets a good airing at funerals and wakes. It never quite hit the intended mark for me.

Life is short. Not necessarily. All that we know for sure is that none of us have any idea for sure. Children die unexpectedly and wrinkled up folks live past 100 and most of us get plunked down somewhere in between.

I never heard my grandmother Magill say life was short. For her, life was one long adventure. She escaped the crossroads of a Pennsylvania village and ventured off to college at the dawn of the Roosevelt era – Teddy that is – when a woman’s place was well understood: hands on the pot and babies on the hip. Work and wonder would carry her on to Puerto Rico, up to Manhattan (where a degree from Columbia was added), down to deep, deep Alabama, and then overseas to the Egyptian Sudan where she married my grandfather; the one and the same mentioned above.

Grammy lived to 100 and my sister to 67. I lost a close childhood friend at 19. We can’t waste time trying to size up our allotted sand in the hourglass. Life isn’t necessarily short or long or middling. But it is fucking unpredictable. Isn’t the key, really, to get in a grand story worth sharing?

Enjoy it now. I don’t propose suffering now, but there is more to life than margaritas deck-side. If we want our eulogists’ writing assignment to be easy, then we need to lead lives worth retelling. And we’re all going to have someone retelling our stories, right? No one gets out of here alive.

So what’s my point? Go bold, go deep, now. Your remaining days may *not* be short. You may have decades left to create a magic that reflects all the best of your gifts and passions. Then again, you may have one more day. Be the author of the narrative you want delivered on that sunny day in the chapel, or it may fall to someone much less vested in making you sound amazing. Offer a highlight reel that can’t be cut and cropped; one that keeps everyone roused and laughing between tears.

Put a pint in my hand and I’ll stay full of barley-inspired toasts to you for many a round. But if you want deeper reflections on a life that truly mattered, that left everyone who knew and touched you in a better place, take the leap now. Uncover, develop, and share that bold gift as only you can.

Dedicated to Cathy. You made my job so easy sister.

Published initially on February 11, 2018.



Finding Your Howl

Suggested Song: [How Hard](#), Bill Magill

Suggested Drink: [Thurston Howl](#), rum, brandy, gin, pineapple and grapefruit juices. (to sooth those weathered pipes).

I've wanted to be rock star since I was young. I gave it the old college try as a teen, then surrendered to the odds and went off to college. But I never gave up on the dream. I kept on writing music and making bedroom demos through my 20s, and recorded a proper studio album in my 30s. It was a decent effort, but my voice just didn't have that edgy rock n roll bark that I so loved hearing in the greats: Daltrey, Waits, Cobain, Bon Scott. I couldn't find my howl.

A lot of us are inspired but mediocre at things we really love, particularly when we're young. Passion and effort aren't always enough, unfortunately. But there are plenty of examples of mediocrity flowering into something truly special in later years. Consider Czech composer Leos Janacek. He penned a respectable piece at 22 in the late 1800s, and then spent his next 30 years mostly doing folklore research. Janacek kept plugging away in his spare time but didn't find real renown until 62, with the completion of his opera *Janufa*, to be followed by *Sinfonietta* and then many other classics.

Why his later-in-life bloom? Maybe he finally had time on his hands to immerse more deeply, or it was the continued honing of his talent, or the inspired provocation drawn from his ache for the beautiful Kamila, married and 35 years younger, for whom he took a hard tumble just about the time *Janufa* was in work. Love bloomed, he soared, the rest is for us to enjoy.



Another good example is Charles Bukowski. At 24 his "Aftermath of a Lengthy Rejection Slip" got published to some decent reviews. Then he went on a prolonged bender and deep dive into the seedier side of life. Like Janacek, Bukowski kept at his craft but had little to show for it. His real break through came at 51 with "Post Office," which he wrote in 3 weeks after quitting the Postal Service in Los Angeles as a carrier. (I picked up a copy at City Lights in San Francisco earlier this year. What a great read.)



I was at a Chagall exhibit in Aix-en-Provence last week, at the beautiful Hôtel Caumont in the center of town. Chagall established himself as a transcendent and successful painter early in life, and unlike Janacek and Bukowski kept the acclaim rolling. But what I admire most about Chagall is his leap into distinctly different and challenging forms of art in his later years: ceramics and stone sculpture and stained glass, starting in his mid 60s. *You think I'm this, but now I'm that. Allez allez, keep up!*

Maybe you're in your 50s or older and thinking that the window of passion possibilities has long closed. That comes down to the commitment you are ready to make and embarrassment you are willing to suffer. But who cares about embarrassment? No one will say at your funeral, *yeah she was great at X but really embarrassed herself at that Y thing she so loved*. No, a best friend or sibling or child will say that you had a

real passion for Y and immersed yourself deeply in it. You will produce something authentic that people will either embrace or reject, but everyone will respect the effort.

I went back into the recording studio last year with a binder full of songs and a talented bunch of musicians. A new album after a 25-year pause, this was my Janacek moment in more ways than one.

Why now? My confidence was buoyed by the inspired material and quality of the crew, but more than that my voice had taken on, finally, enough gravel to sing what I wanted to hear. Age and more than a few Bukowski evenings had lined those silky pipes with a rough patina of smoky leather. It just wasn't my time at 30. It might be now. I've found my howl.

Published initially on December 4, 2018.

Of Angels and Ghosts

Suggested Song: [Diamonds and Rust](#), Joan Baez

Suggested Drink: [Green Ghost cocktail](#). Gin, Chartreuse, lime juice.

*Well I'll be damned
here comes your ghost again
but that's not unusual
it's just that the moon is full
and you happened to call.*

- Joan Baez

Joan Baez performed at the Olympia in Paris last week on a stop through her final tour. Her voice was dynamic as ever, and touch with the guitar fluid and delicate. I went to the show thinking, “okay, she’s a legend so why not?” What I enjoyed was a concert of surprising grace and emotion, Baez introducing each song in flawless French, the audience reverent and hanging on every word and note. When she played *Diamonds and Rust*, her heartbroken dig at Dylan, it got me thinking about that particular ghost in her life; the ghosts we all suffer.

Our lives are inhabited by the otherworldly. They are spurred from memories to comfort or vex. Angels glide in when invited; our ghosts slip away only when ready.

Do they exist? They very much exist for those who very much believe. You can accept or deny their presence in your life, but cannot question this fundamental principal: we create our own realities, those versions of who we were and how we were loved, and the laws of the universe that govern our future. Did Dylan love Baez? I suspect that she was convinced *yes* in the early days, then a time she suspected *no longer*, and perhaps later doubted everything. So reality is conveniently pliant and the truth selective. *Diamonds and Rust* provides some hints to Baez’s own take.



It's January in Paris and you are freezing.
I see you framed in a soft falling snow and feel warm.
No, it's just your ghost again.

I've started lighting a candle for my sister every evening. She's with me instantly, glowing against the wax and flickering along the wick. She sits with me at the piano and I ask her advice over dinner. Cathy lifts my mood and lowers my tensions, like she always has. She calms and encourages, so she is real, as evident as my fingers on the keys, floating in on angel wings. And at the end of the night, when I blow out the candle, she lifts away on the last glimmer of flame until I call again.



Another piano session at Bill's place.

Sometimes we confuse angels from ghosts. We doubt our memories and question emotions. We visit old haunts to call new spirits, we light candles and recite poems in the hopes of conjuring the angels of old. Sometimes they come. Other times we find nothing but phantoms and smoke.

Chambre 35 at the Hotel Emile, with its clawfoot baignoire and 3rd floor view down Rue du Roi de Sicile, is haunted. Not-yet-lovers soak in the steamy bath with rose

petals and champagne. They tease and tempt and soap each other toes. He's never seen a woman so enchanting, no moment so inviting, as her and now. Ever. He'll do nothing to risk the spell, just lay back submerged in this sudsy bliss until she slowly floats over him, plants her kiss and smiles, "ce maintenant le lit, non?"

Have you been in moments like this, completely surrendered to the dream and memory? But when your eyes open you are alone. You had called an angel but conjured a ghost. The image dissipates like smoke from a blown out match and you wonder what was real, ever. Diamonds and rust Joan, just diamonds and rust.

Published initially on February 11, 2019.

Analog: It's Back, and the New Black

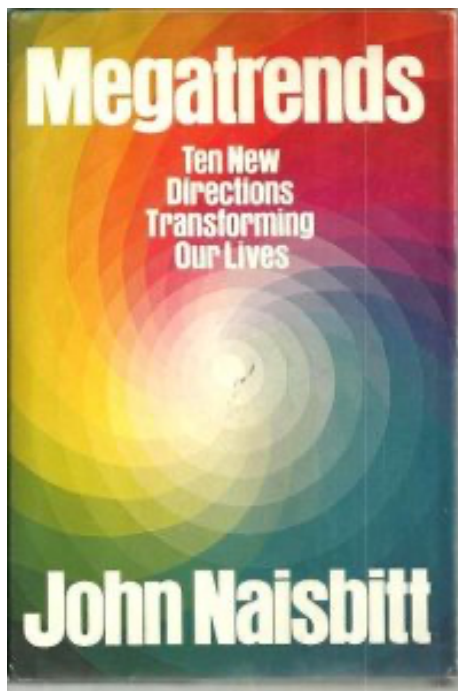
Suggested Song: [The Human Touch](#), Bruce Springsteen

Suggested Drink: Anything on [the cocktails menu](#) at Analogue in Greenwich Village, NY.

I hope someday you'll join us.

- John Lennon

In 1982 a remarkable book was published defining the 10 most powerful global trends transforming our lives. *Megatrends*, written by John Naisbitt, was a blowout sensation that sold over 14 million copies and dominated the NYT Bestseller list for over 2 years, mostly at the top.



1982 was still largely the analog era and too early for Naisbitt to foresee recent technology disruptions like Blockchain or the Internet of Things (although the dissolution of consolidated hierarchies was a key theme), but his #2 on the list should give us all great pause. He was uncomfortable with an emergent invasive technology push and predicted a trend towards human balance and technology pull based on users' true needs. To Naisbitt, *high touch* technology recognized that science "cannot solve all problems or do away with the need for responsibility and discipline."

Fast forward to 2019 and undisciplined technology push seems to have missed the bulletin. That we over-connect and hyper-share is our own undoing, but organizations happy to encourage and exploit these tendencies are at best calculating and self-serving, and at worst sinister. And in the first signs of blowback two related but independent waves are forming: awareness of the loss of human touch and anxiety over the loss of privacy.

No one is suggesting an end to digital media – that genie is well out of the bottle – but there is a growing awareness of the dangers lurking therein and a growing discomfort with blind faith in the masters of this domain. Analog is cool again and rebuilding its brand.

Human Touch

Ubiquitous connectivity is harming the sincerity of our human connections, and doesn't that read strangely? How can it be that the easier it is to connect, the less we feel sincerely connected? It takes no more than a walk down any city sidewalk or repose in a popular café to observe that we are ignoring the

friends at our elbow in favor of remote pals with whom we can text, or whose new picture streams need to be swiped through *right now*.



The local highschoolers sweeping down my street every weekday at noon chatter and goof with buddies at their sides while typing away distractedly on their phones. After school they'll hook up with their typing targets for drinks, then ignore them while texting back to their lunchtime besties.

Wouldn't it be more satisfying to eliminate the digital distance and revel in the camaraderie of the analog moment?

Pinging and getting pinged suggests that you have a very cool and dynamic social scene going on; I get that. So then not constantly tapping implies the opposite, that you're a lonely loser? Teenagers cringe at that particular tarring and that's fair enough, but shouldn't age and maturity allow the rest of us to move beyond those particular insecurities?

Yes is the answer of course, and a growing pool of analog acolytes are emphasizing that realization with a hearty *Hell Yes!*

Data Privacy

That the titans of social media are poor shepherds of our personal data has been widely revealed. There is no need to spill more digital ink on that phenomenon here, but interested readers can refer to a newsletter just launched by the NYT called [The Privacy Project](#). To quote a newsletter quote from Matt Cagle, ACLU attorney, "Privacy is really about being able to define for ourselves who we are for the

world and on our own terms. That's not a choice that belongs to an algorithm or data broker and definitely not to Facebook."

Yet many of us are happy to make that deal: a stage to share our carefully crafted (and questionably authentic) self-images in return for the devil's unfettered access to our personal data: interests and alliances, locations, browsing histories, and rolodex of contacts (whether or not they've agreed to the tradeoff).

I plead guilty but at least am not alone. And an emerging riptide is forming along the digital beach, tugging at those of us eager for that drag back to the analog sea. I'm all in.

Back to the Farm

So there is survivalist movement afoot; a back-to-the-farm redux for 2020. We can label it digital minimalism or going off the internet grid. It has nothing to do with mountain compounds or the hoarding of bullets and canned goods. It has everything to do with resistance, and who doesn't love a good resistance movement?

As part of this nouveau vague the term *analog* has taken position front and center, a new cool. Just two examples include a NYT article that ran last week (I quote from it too often, but it's one of the last truly great newspapers in America; consider subscribing) titled [Digital Addiction Getting You Down? Try an Analog Cure](#)



and a new hard cover publication called *The Analog Sea Review*, an offline (naturally) journal of poems, short stories and essays that can be found at your local bookstore, ... and only at your local bookstore (sorry Amazon).

It's small movement in early days but gaining attention and it's got mine. For the moment I'll continue to publish my newsletters online because I want them easily found and read. And my music will remain available in Spotify and other media platforms, although compared to a CD (get yours [here](#)) the sound quality is horrible. But then isn't that the sacrifice we make for our online social connections as well: a quality experience for casual convenience.

Published initially on April 18, 2019.

Science Skeptic and the Mystic Tarot

Suggested Song: [Aquarius, Let the Sunshine In](#): James Rado, Jerome Ragni, and Galt MacDermot. (I love this version by The 5th Dimension)

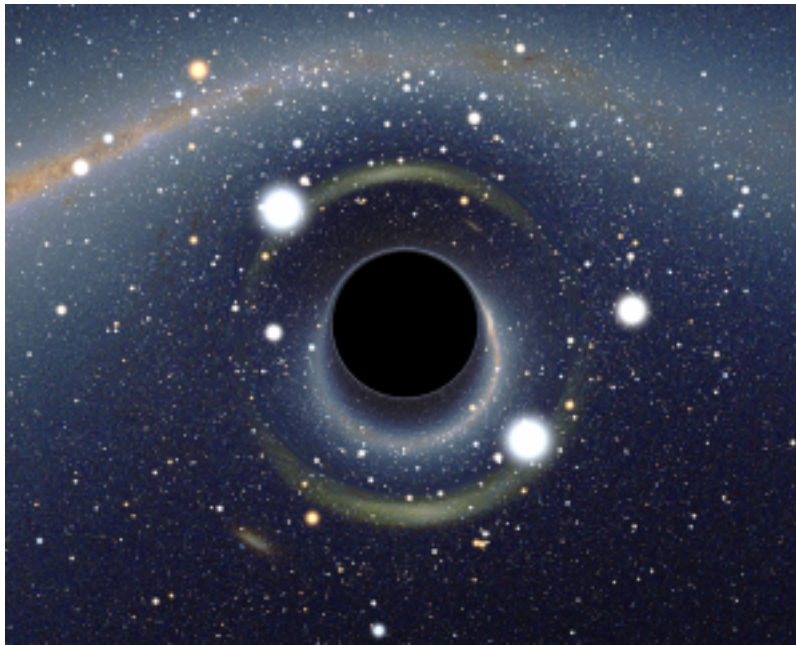
Suggested Drink: [Mystic Martini](#). Vodka, absinthe, olive brine, green olive

*When the moon is in the seventh house
And Jupiter aligns with Mars*

I bought tarot cards while in San Francisco recently. It was an undisciplined move for this disciple of science, but not an impulse buy. I was feeling blocked and sought a shift beyond the unusual to break through. The esoteric arts seemed just crazy enough, and the tarot was an option high on the wackiness scale. I found cards in the Haight (naturally), studied a few books over coffees or beer, started laying out simple readings at the kitchen table, and became enchanted. Here's why.

Sciencism

I'm not naturally drawn to the mystical arts. I pursued physics in college and studied the theories of giants like Foucault, Einstein, and Bohr. I believe in the scientific method: imagination, observation, and verification built on empirical evidence. *Yeah, that sounds reasonable, now prove it!*



Science does a pretty good job of explaining how things behave; tiny things like quirks and massive things like black holes. The arc of an arrow or locus of a sub-atomic particle? We got that, even when said particle is (almost mystically) in 2 places at once.

What do we do with this knowledge? A lot of good things and a few unimaginably horrible things that counter all best intentions. We heat the winters and cool the summers and tame nature at home while venturing beyond our garden of Eden to uninhabitable worlds. We put men on a barren grey moon while burning our own blue paradise to a crisp. We develop an unlimited source of renewable energy and then commit its stockpiles to assuring our own mutual destruction.

So the breathtaking sweep of scientific evolution, from the earliest mathematical foundations of Babylon and Maya to their extrapolations for modelling motion and mass by Newton and Galileo, and through Einstein's impossibly elegant mathematical reduction that relates that mass to energy through the inviolable speed of light (in a vacuum) has led us to this: perhaps two generations remain before the planet is reduced to a bleached cliff notes version of its former verdant splendor, or we blow ourselves to smithereens first.



Earth is Melting, RadillacVIII

So what is science worth if through its application we ominously degrade the quality of our existence or threaten that very existence itself? It's a question worth considering.

Science is an astounding, evolving compendium of knowledge fundamental to making sense of the many mystifying dimensions of the world micro to massive; physical, chemical, and biological. As for providing the common sense and tools needed to harness this knowledge for the greatest benefit of everyone? Not so good. Some people lose their faith in the preeminence of religion. I've lost my faith in the primacy of science.

Mysticism

Unlike science, the mystic arts provide zero utility in understanding the physical world beyond; whether just beyond our touch or light years beyond our sight. They provide an interesting option to understanding the world within, however. Useless at explaining how things behave, but effective (for the open minded) for reflecting on why we behave in the crazy ways we do. And if we hold a clearer lens into our own behavior, perhaps we make better decisions about that behavior.



A stack of colorful cards is nothing more than that. In a vacuum (again with the vacuum!) they offer no particular value beyond the pleasure of a game. But equipped with [a good guide book](#), a glass of decent wine, and the help of a friendly ghost (now this is key for me) that stack of 78 cards comes alive in its many dimensions and possibilities.

The true power of the tarot is in its various facets and options for interpretation. Imagine gazing through a magic kaleidoscope that could clarify your past and foretell the future. Twisting the tube sent the many colors of varying shapes and dimensions into unpredictable spins; each shade, size, and trajectory open to interpretation. Now here's the magic: that interpretation is unique to each viewer. There is no rigid set of scientific guidelines for analysis. Yes, there is a system to the tarot, but what you draw from the colors and spins will be different than what I draw, because our histories and expectations, and the burning questions in

our lives are all wildly different.

Kings and queens, princesses and princes, knights and swords and cups and disks and wands, blues and reds and yellows and greys, fire and water, and then throw in the planets. These are just a few of the kaleidoscopic elements of the tarot that drive the meaning of the cards.

I have my own belief system and hope that you do too, ... one that offers comfort and solid footing. I've mentioned in [an earlier essay](#) that I light a candle each evening for my sister and she is present in the moment. I fill her in on my day and invite Cathy to guide the cards that I select and lay out each evening. She has joined the conversation and I (want to) believe is giving the readings a mystical bump here and ethereal tug there, and from her side of the spiritual divide bringing order to the cards I've randomly pulled from the deck. If true then I've tapped into something powerful, and if not true than I'm just

connecting with someone I miss and love. Either way it provides a fun system for pondering decisions about what's around the corner; immediate or longer term.

Scientific? No. Spiritual? Kind of. Mystical? Definitely.

Some believe that Jesus healed the blind and others that Moses parted the sea. Maybe Mohammad did split the moon and one particle can exist in two places at the same time. I believe that my sister cuts the cards. We choose our miracles. I'm good with mine. What are yours?

Published initially on May 28, 2019.

The Masturbation Ultimatum

Suggest song: [Dancing With Myself](#), Billy Idol

Suggested drink: [Sex on the Beach cocktail](#). Vodka, peach schnapps, crème de cassis, orange and cranberry juices, maraschino cherry.

If you don't engage with nature can you care about the environment?

If you don't engage with people can you care about humanity?

Is the self-command of masturbation better than the uncontrolled abandon of sex? (Wait, what?)

Read on.

Disengaging From Nature

I'm a runner. It serves as equal parts fitness, therapy, and meditation, and my most profound breakthroughs arrive while under the morning skies, putting a few short kilometers on the Nikes. Out early in the world.

Our wild environment – rural or urban – is great inspiration for the creative mind. Sites, sounds, smells, the touch; these things all get our neurons firing, and an engaged brain is a powerful thing.

Distractions are the enemy, particularly of the digital variety. Ear buds and Spotify provide a comforting exile against the natural, unruly world when out

in it. Zen epiphanies are blasted off the creative neurons when rock n roll is ringing the ears, as much as I love rock n roll. The lungs at work, a flock of birds against a pale dawn sky, the crunch of autumn leaves under foot, the smell of baking bread before opening hours at the boulangerie. This is real, this is analog (covered in [a recent essay](#)), these sensations are stimulating and blissfully out of one's control.





That we are losing the war against global warming should come as no surprise. Most of us would rather plug in and insulate against the unruly world than soak in its beauty, to fully immerse. When on my run this morning I kept a tally of the ear-budded versus unplugged; the other runners I encountered en route: 4 to 1. The pluggers rule the day; masturbation on the move preferred to a rolling intercourse

with nature. And the less we truly appreciate something, the less motivated we are to preserve it.

Disengaging From People

I'm a talker. When I'm at a café and someone intriguing is at the next table I'll feel an itch to engage. There have been awkward moments but mostly not. My antennae are pretty good at sensing who will welcome a question about that book in their hands or suggestion for a city I've overheard them discussing.

Chatty barflies like me are becoming a rarer breed. Heck, friends don't even talk to the friends at their elbow any more. They busy themselves instead with Instagram photos and Facebook notifications. I'd like to blame the young, and they are the biggest violators of non-engagement, but this social virus has spread to all generations, sadly.

Witness cinema attendance. It's down 9 percent to this point in 2019 over the same period last year (which was already at a 20+ year low) and Hollywood is hurting. The appeal of Netflix from the sofa is understandable, but the art of *àpres-theater* debates with friends is being lost. In my hometown of Aix-en-Provence there are a row of lively brasseries just across the large boulevard fronting the Renoir theatre. Le Grillon, La Belle Epoque, Nino's Café, Les Deux Garçons. All are great options for a glass of wine and the *so what did you think?* kickoff. I can't imagine enjoying a fascinating film without that follow-up.



It breaks my heart, this preference for human isolation, for social masturbation. The less we truly value something, the less motivated we are to preserve it. Recent articles in the Atlantic and elsewhere are confirming that interest in sex has fallen sharply amongst the young, in America and most everywhere the Internet is widely available. When we no longer prize intimate engagement, when a Facebook Story on a 5" screen is more satisfying than adventures shared over a couple of pints, when the sofa and remote have replaced a cinema seat and popcorn, ... sex, like with someone else?

So what?

The downsides of disengagement can be best witnessed through the current leadership in Washington: Trump, Twiddler-in-Chief. He engages the world alone, through a controlled bubble that leaves him oblivious and dangerous. Nature is enjoyed through a limousine window and global warming a hoax. Friends and allies are dispensable and critical alliances dismissed with a midnight tweet. Sex is to be grabbed between the legs ("they let you do it!"), but it's even better to master your own domain. Okay, he might not believe that, but my gut says he's not seeing much of Melania in the president's chamber these days. "Go grab your own thing, Donald."

As president, Trump leads by example and a depressingly high number of Americans are still happy to follow. Twiddle Nation and isolation. What could possibly go wrong?

Published initially on September 14, 2019.

Letting Go

Suggested Song: [Let It Be](#), The Beatles.

Suggested Drink: Champagne, your choice (it's almost New Years!)

A brief aside

Few cities are more beautiful than Paris, and fewer still more magical than Paris during the winter holidays. I'm in Paris this week, with the Champs Elysees ablaze in holiday lights, the winding sidewalks through Montmartre strangely clear, tables at the trendy Marais restaurants available, and museum lines, ... well there are no museum lines. Merci grévistes!

“We must be willing to let go of the life we've planned,
so as to have the life that is waiting for us.”

- Joseph Conrad

Holding on



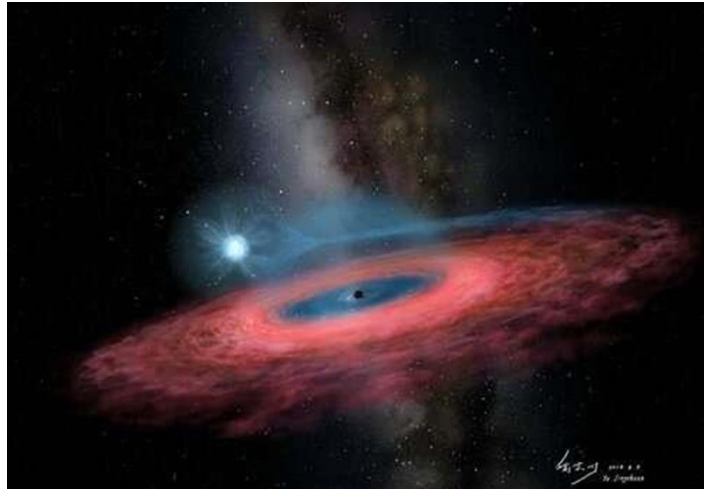
Crack the Whip, Angela Morgan

I skated a lot as a kid on the lakes and streams of chilly Pennsylvania. My friends and I loved to play *crack the whip* out on the ice, forming a chain glove to glove and pulling a wide arc, the person on the far end holding on for dear life as the sweep of the line grew taut and picked up speed. To stay up on 2

blades as you careened around that bumpy winter glass took every bit of energy and concentration, slipping and scraping and fighting to keep your balance core. Exhilarating, terrifying, dangerous.

I left some blood on the ice once, getting spun over a small damn on a frozen creek near home. You have to know when to let go and I held on just a moment too long. Six green stitches to the chin and I was lacing up the skates the next day after school.

I've had jobs that paid too much, girlfriends who looked too hot, and vices that felt too good to let go. They fed the ego and enabled myths about who I was and what I deserved. And then would come the realization that this brilliant sun around which I spun was instead an all-consuming black hole, and that great sucking sound was my authentic self being perverted by its massive gravity. More blood on the ice and stitches to the chin.



I find consolation in good company. Many of us suffer from this stubborn reluctance to let go of reckless situations. We know when we're getting too far over our skates but don't want the ride to end. As the sweep around whatever dark star is keeping us in orbit picks up speed and the inertial force pulls harder, we hold on even tighter. Ride 'em cowboy.

The bad news is that we are ego-driven creatures prone to peril, if said ego gets a little tickle. It's wholly unfair to blame the source: the situation, person, or vice that is wrenching us around. We step in harm's way and convince ourselves that all is cool. *Why the hell did you spin me so close to the dam god dammit? Well why the hell didn't you just let go?*

Letting go

Exactly. The good news is that we're not buckled in, we're holding on. The moment we let go we spin off on a new trajectory of our own making, and it's 100% up to us to decide when to release the grip. We are in total control of our next moment, next day, next year. Just ... let ... go



When a lot of wild coiled up inertial energy is released into straight-line momentum, you are a radiant shooting star on a thrilling new direction. You are at the wheel, no one and nothing is tugging your chain, and a new bearing is completely in your hands. Few things in life are more invigorating than that realization.

So as the new year approaches let me ask you this: is that center of mass that keeps your life in orbit a bright shining star that lights the way and

warms your heart, or something more troubling and ominous? If it's #1 you are truly blessed and if it's #2, .. well it's time to let go. Just a little blood on the ice, nothing that a few stitches can't heal.

Published initially on December 20, 2019.

The Covid Cure

Suggested Song: [Let's Go Crazy](#), Prince

Suggested Drink: [Isolation Ale](#), Odell Brewing Company

Shutdown Redux

Le confinement has returned to France. Home detention is once again le rigueur, the daily walk/run (keep it brief and close to home) and occasional trip to the grocery excepted, hall pass in hand. Our neighbors at all points – Germany, Italy, Spain, England – are exacting similar decrees. Note to America: stock up now.

This lockdown is different than the spring fling. The winter months are looming with darker days, dryer air, vacations over and kids to school. All are standard ingredients for a thriving flu season, and now Covid is piling on.

It's going to be long winter.

Strategy v1.0: *Preservation*

Getting through the first confinement was a short course on adaption. We were debutantes at this *no, you can't leave your home* thing and trying to minimize the disruption. Preservation of a semblance of normalcy was the guiding principal: maintaining our active social calendars through Zoom; eating out through delivery in; uninterrupted spending through Amazon Prime; the Sunday cinema on Netflix, microwaved popcorn in hand. See, it's not that bad!



What did we learn? There is a reason we pay up for the restaurant experience. A television display is a poor substitute for the majestic silver screen. Online shopping is fast, easy, and antiseptically void of any

neighborhood rapport. And apéros with family or friends over Zoom are a struggle in spontaneity and flow. Yeah, kind of sucks.

Strategy v2.0: *Reinvention*

So here we are again and may find ourselves repeatedly through 2021. Do we stock up the shelter, lock down the shutters, and prepare for more concessions? Is there another option?

One could consider this a unique moment, a golden opportunity really, to veer off the rails and defy everything everyone, including yourself, believes about you. Covid may just be your horrible excuse to try something radically, beautifully different; to go a bit nuts. Less cheapened preservation and more fresh invention, even if just for a few gloriously whimsical months.

Where to start? Everyone's crazy angle is different, and what makes you beautifully bewildering during these mundane weeks – *has she gone mad?* – is unique to you. Read the taro, learn some hip hop moves, dye your hair green, start a vision board for a brand new you. Here's what I've been doing:



- Less glitchy video, more indigo ink. There are few joys that save the soul better than penning a note on quality paper to someone whom you care about deeply. A good fountain pen is indispensable. I'm not sure what is more satisfying: writing the letter or waiting the few days it takes to navigate the post and imagining that smile when opened. I'm lucky to be in France, where shops that specialize in paper and pens remain common. And guess what? My fountain pen doesn't get a bad connection.
- Less home dinner delivery, more kitchen creation. Our local restaurants are suffering badly now and deserve our takeout orders. But, when you're locked in for endless hours spending a few more of those in the kitchen is a healthy distraction, wine in hand of course. To make the

experience more engaged I've been diving into ethnic inspirations far removed from the usual list of the tried-and-true. A friend turned me on to the art of Korean kimchi earlier this year and I've also been experimenting with Japanese udon soups. Neither are particularly difficult but far enough out of my comfort zone to keep things unpredictable.

- Less *One-Click* impulse buys, more patience that the local shops will be back open soon. Our neighborhood economies rely on a diversity of commerce to thrive. You come for a coffee, buy a dozen tulips, and pick up stationary for those letters to loved ones. The flower shop owner takes your tulip money and buys a sandwich at corner café. The café owner says *come back again*, then spends the sandwich margin on new novel from the corner bookstore. Payrolls are met, rents are paid, the commercial equivalent of a coral reef is in full bloom.

Amazon is a neighborhood commerce killer. The sole proprietor is helpless against the impressive machine that Bezos built. It is convenient, cheap, expedient, and leaves our neighborhoods bleached of diversity like a great coral reef in decline. Amazon doesn't need more your money. Their stock is up 85% since Covid Wave-1 hit in March, while your local guy is struggling mightily to hold on. Many won't. What do you want your neighborhood strip to look like next year?

Oh yeah, I've been reading some stuff lately that I never imagined would be on the bedside stand: Brontë, TE Lawrence, my grandmother's African travels diary from 1912-14. It's the year for it.

I'd love to know what you're doing to keep your sanity in a world gone mad. My advice: meet crazy with crazy. Please stay safe, there's a sunrise ahead

Published initially on November 23, 2020.

The Post Corona Blues

Suggested Song: [Virus](#), Björk

Suggested Drink: [Strawberry gin and tonic](#). Strawberries, gin, tonic water, bitters, lime.

It's mid-May and those touchstones of our pre-Covid quotidian are reemerging from this long winter of lethargy and isolation. Cafés are hosing down their terrace tables, the boys of summer are taking the field, pétanque parties are back on the Provence calendar (bring your rosé passport), and one feels encouraged to consider summer travel plans, maybe. We're not yet back to the bis(ous) in France, but air kisses are pollinating the breeze.

Everyone is ready for the world to turn again, but part of me is suffering a post-pandemic partum blues. New rituals and routines were grudgingly adopted, and now, to my surprise, I'm resisting their repeal. How about you?

Most of us entered *wartime* kicking and complaining. The masks and curfews and comatose streets where a tiresome affront. Then something unexpected unfurled: my adaption slowly evolved from noisy surrender to covert embrace.

Four things in particular have grown on me: hygiene hysteria, hermitude, travel restrictions, and a damn good cocktail. Let's take a closer look.

Hygiene Hysteria

I've gained a new appreciation of protection against bugs, adopting a certain compulsive prophylaxis. Start with the mask.

I hated the mask at first. The fogged-up sunglasses; the hindered breathing; the constant "damn it, forgot my mask again." Then a realization: that cloth cover was the best antiaging solution in my arsenal! The sags and the creases and the two-tone lifetime tan, all beautifully concealed, at least for that brief walk about town or trip to the grocery. I lose 10 years when masked up and love it.

I also appreciate that layer of discretion when slipping through the back alleys of Aix avoiding the predictable paths of this person or that. We all have those days, right? One gains an appreciation of the burka. There are days when I wouldn't mind having a big black sack hanging in the closet. The Covid mask/sunglasses/wide-brimmed hat combo: perfect for a Howard Hughes steal through town.

Antiseptic hands are another new thing. I was raised on a farm in rural Pennsylvania and my childhood hands were perennially dirty; my Huck Finn feet even worse. Chasing salamanders along muddy creeks is blissfully messy. I've never given much thought to the germ history of stuff I was touching. Jostling with strangers on the Paris metro or forwarding hotdogs on down the row at the ballpark? Never a problem. I

FACE MASK



REQUIRED

was firmly in the camp of *it's all good, I'm boosting my immunity*. Now I travel with a small gel bottle, head to the sink after outings, and am setting perimeter strategies for the café life after Covid. I didn't see that coming but accept that it's just good practice, pandemic or no pandemic. Old dog, new tricks.

Hermitude

Covid put a serious dent into our social lives. The indoor seatings were taped off, then the terrace tables pulled up. We resumed in our homes until gatherings over 6 were banned. Okay, surrender.



A very quiet Place des Cardeurs, Aix-en-Provence. Photo by Velasco, La Boite Sauvage

And then, ... I didn't really miss it. The raucous dinner parties and late-into-the-evening drink ups, the restaurant tabs, the home turned upside down and head inside out while washing dishes at 3 am. I was happy to give all of that a break.

This reversal had mostly to do with the temporary nature of confinement. I knew that we'd be sitting along a leafy boulevard lined with sycamores in Aix sipping rosé or flocking to this home or that beach soon enough again. So, I decided to embrace the hermitude and to quote Katy Perry, *I liked it*.

There's a Lebowsky appeal to stained sweatpants and frayed sweaters, dusty homes, hair gone to seed, sole control of the playlist (Siri, play the Bay City Rollers again), pedestrian wine in 5 liter boxes, locked in by dusk, books in bed by 9, lights out by 10. There was time for curiously odd things like tarot readings and kimchi canning (see earlier essays); activities and a comportment that I wouldn't entertain should others be visiting regularly. Serene solitary confinement.

The travel ban is winding down and curfew rolling back in France. The apéro season is upon us. Confinement is ending, and I'm *mostly* ready. But the hermit has had run of this place for over a year now and not going back in the bottle graciously.

Travel Restrictions

The air travel experience has become insufferable. We all put up with it but who enjoys it? Some people apparently. Airlines were offering [trips to nowhere](#) during lockdowns; the flights were popular.

When it comes to finding points unknown (or known) I love being there, just not going there. A road trip is the exception. Lockdowns and quarantines provided a convenient excuse for avoiding that entire cattle call experience: boarding pass and ID here, now this slow queue, shoes off and everything in that bucket ("c'mon people let's keep it moving!"), another line and more ID, the duty free mall and overpriced food, then a long sit at the crowded terminal, another cattle chute at the gate, boarding pass and ID again, buckle up and elbows in for the next few hours, try not to pee, ... then it starts again at arrival.



No excuses were needed for avoiding travel these past many months. I missed people a lot, particularly my kids in faraway San Francisco, but not the process of getting there. I'm stepping back in the wading pool tepidly with a train trip to Paris in June and then we'll see. I'm bribing the kids to visit me in Aix. As to that deep dive into a wide body across the the big blue sea? It'll happen, don't rush me.

And now to a damn good cocktail

Curfews and lockdowns force a reconsideration of one's attitude on personal temperance. Some of us find all of that alone time a caution to curtail the evening tipple(s). Others find it an excuse to widen the guard rails.

I considered the abstemious option and locking the wine cave at first but was advised against it by a sage friend. A third option was to explore new directions, reasoning that the intake was neither more nor less, just different.

Hence, cocktails entered the equation. The art of preparing a good cocktail is no different than the secret to kitchen confidence: quality ingredients prepared with good tools and a lot of love for those whose company you most enjoy. Staying in season is key to both. The cold winter greys inspire Russian vodka creations comrade; the fresh spring greens calls for British gin old bean.



So, Moscow Mules have yielded stubbornly (it's the mule) to strawberry gin and tonics (recipe link above) as the weather warms and local berries fill the market stalls in Provence.

Strawberries are in particular abundance and cheap at the moment, their perfume an irresistible siren seduction that demands purchase. My limes come from Maïtai, who mans (womans?) a produce table at the Place de Richelme on Tuesdays. Anything she touches is as blessed as her sunny smile. The final key for me is the cocktail shaker from [C&D Tools](#): an heirloom American-made bar tool offered as a gift from Kris, the company's co-founder. How I became friends with this American diplomat stationed in Kinshasa, DRC is another strange tale for a future essay.

This is the time to consider your own permanent adoptions after a season of compulsory adaptation. Good luck with reentry. It'll be fine, get out there!

Published initially on May 12, 2021.

Coming Out: It Starts with Yourself

Suggested song: [The Real Me](#). The Who.

Suggested drink: [Curtain Call cocktail](#). Rum, champagne, lemon juice, simple syrup, bitters.

“Honesty and transparency make you vulnerable. Be honest and transparent anyway.”

– Mother Teresa

June is Gay Pride month. The San Francisco parade has been cancelled this year and that’s a shame. I have colorful memories of that brilliant cavalcade: the vibrant floats and flamboyant dance troupes and butch bikers tattooed up in black leather and blue denim. Loud and proud.



I was called into a group-wide meeting one morning while working at Livermore Labs back in the 80s. Our area supervisor announced (paraphrasing) that from this point forward John should be addressed as Joanne and will be dressing accordingly. Expect female attire and makeup. She’ll also be using the ladies’ toilets. Any questions?

This coming out was one of the most startling and bravest things I’d ever seen. The John I had known was a burly guy’s guy and husband with kids. To be considered for reassignment surgery he first needed to live full time for a year as Joanne. I couldn’t imagine the courage it took to share that decision with family, friends, and now coworkers.

"Everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about. Be kind. Always."

- Robin Williams

We all have our closets. We perform on an open stage and let our hair down with the cast and crew when the curtain falls. A very few good friends get invited back to the dressing room, but then there is the closet. I’m hoping that I’m not the only one with a scary closet.

There are few resentments worse than feeling like a fraud, of being inauthentic. Real honesty requires a precarious journey from closet to stage in full drag, and that can be a tough walk. The good news is that

as we get older this gets easier. A certain *let the chips fall where they may* settles in with age. The urgencies that guided our earlier years – career and vows and status – become the lesser priorities to authenticity; leaving this world with a history that reflects our truest selves.



Behind the Curtain: Martin Watson

Being honest with oneself is of course step one, and often the most difficult of conversations. I lived most of my adult years in San Francisco and didn't bat an eye (or even a heavily mascaraed lash extension!) at people being true to their sexual and gender orientations. But professional orientation was a different beast altogether. It is convenient to suppress misgivings over career choices when those positions are filling the bank account and feeding the ego. *Damn I'm special!* I was front and center of that line but in good company, particularly in the investment banking and venture capital industries.

There's no shame in pursuing pay over passion when young and in one's prime income-generating years (I'm happy to debate this over a glass of rosé). There's great dishonor when continuing to shelter in the closet post mid-life, to oneself primarily. What you do, where you live, and whom you love. The legacy you leave. Are you getting these right? Are the what, where, and with whom choices you are making now reflect the most authentic and beautiful you? Will your eulogy be delivered by people whom loved you most, reflecting on things for which you wanted to be celebrated, in a setting that defined your spirit?

That is a lot to consider.

A final note. I founded the Interprize Group in 2013 to help people, mostly at 50 plus, pursue grand life ambitions of deep personal meaning. If I'm being honest, I'll admit to using these workshops as much for self-discovery as for guiding others. Authenticity and purpose are 2 topics that get a lot of attention in these workshops. For the past 3 years I've been focused on a grand ambition of my own and the workshops have been on hold. We are offering a new and completely redesigned Life Leap Workshop

this October in Provence. You can find more information [here](#). If you are curious to know more please get in touch and we'll set up a time to chat. Let's get you out of the closet.

Published initially on June 11, 2021.

Back to First Principles

Suggested Song: [I Believe in a Dream](#), Bill Magill

Suggested Drink: [French 75](#): champagne, gin or cognac, lemon, simple syrup.

Like almost everyone at the break of a new year I'd been plotting a different start to the next phase. A revival. Covid was diluting down, I was vaccinating up, and my system was primed for an animated resurrection of dormant, or perhaps entirely new, ambitions. Bring on 2022! On January 1, nothing. January 2, ...still drawing blanks. Midmonth found me even more aimless and adrift. My reliable custom of new-years rebirth had abandoned me. What was happening?

Entropy: en-tro·py / noun

A process of degradation or running down or a trend to disorder.

- Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Covid has been an easy out for getting sidetracked on life's plans. Can't travel. Hate Zoom. Off balance. Fair enough, now it's time to get over it. Nature's natural order is *always* toward disorder. Plants wilt and die. Cells in our bodies corrupt (and we wilt and die). Gears rust and software gets buggy. As Neil Young sang, *rust never sleeps*. Entropy never rests. When all bogs down one needs a strategy.



My very first vocation, pre suffusing in rosé on hot Provence afternoons, before teaching business, prior to financing startups, previous to writing reports on stocks and markets, earlier than wrenching on Star Wars lasers, ... no way, way before all of that, I worked on cars. I've been up to my elbows in axle grease and wrapped many a rusty tailpipe in muffler bandage. A car mechanic makes his living on entropy in action.

All grand ambitions lose momentum and yield to gravity without an equal or greater force to keep them in motion. The bigger the plans (and the best plans are absurdly audacious), the greater the effort required. Consider this Magill's 3rd Law of Life Motion. When inspiration flags and ambitions suffer from the entropy affliction, return to first principles and apply a dose of Spartan discipline. This is the antidote.

First Principals: first prin-ci-ples / noun (plural)

The basic and most important reasons for doing or believing something.

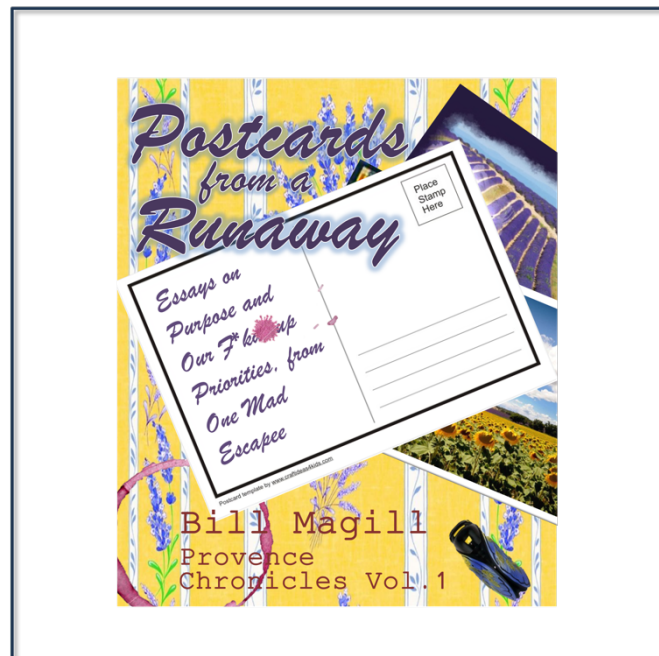
- Cambridge Dictionary

Near the end of January I shared a coffee with Jonathan Simons (more on him below) and had a breakthrough: I needed to get back to first principles. When I upended my life 12 years earlier – when I quit my job, divorced my wife, and moved across the globe – what the hell was I thinking? That was a deeply disruptive decision to all involved, so what was the motivation, the justification, behind that madness, that moment of *this I must do now!*? What were my first principles?

First, some backstory.

When I moved to Aix-en-Provence in 2010 I had a big basket of mid-life dreams to pursue: write essays and books, record music and produce a musical, teach, give workshops on audacious life leaps, suffer a mad love affair, and try being Bill in entirely new and not yet understood ways in an unfamiliar land. The cable cars, foggy slopes, domestic surety, and San Francisco's world of high-tech finance were in my rear-view mirror; ahead was nothing but alien green field.

These things I mostly did, but to little acclaim and largely unnoticed (the love affair excepted). My first compilation of essays – *Postcards from a Runaway* – was



published in 2014 on Zook, which summarily folded. My 2018 album – *Last Night at the Ha-Ra* – was self-released and still hasn't generated 1,000 listens on Spotify. The musical I staged around that album score has yet to gain traction with stage or screen producers. I did find a home at INSEAD teaching startup creation, so that gets a check. And I managed to convince Sorbonne CELSA to let me to teach entrepreneurship through the lens of life change (what I call interpreneurship), which they accepted with a puzzled look: *Interpreneurship, c'est quoi ça professeur Magill?* Bless them.

Regrets? Anyone telling you they live life with no regrets either (1) is being dishonest, or (2) lacks the humility to admit that every now and then they seriously fuck up. Do I question the move to Provence and abandonment of my former life? No. Am I frustrated at my continued obscurity? Yes. But I didn't take this path expecting quick celebrity and riches (I'll take them). I pursued a deeper life wild in new experiences, relationships, and possibilities that would fuel a body of celebrated work that would outlive

me. When I recalibrated on these first principles, which nowhere state the words *rich* or *famous*, a crippling sense of frustration washed out, a deep sense of ease washed in, and I exhaled. Revival. I was good.

If you find yourself adrift at this point into the year, take a moment to define (or redefine) your first principles, then reengage. How? These 3 steps are working for me:

1. Reset: Firstly, chill and don't do jack for a few days or weeks; focus on getting back to your baseline. (For non-American readers, jack is short for jack shit. If you're confused as to why shit is proceeded with jack I have no idea, it's an American thing. ... Speaking of American things, you'll find a tune of that very same name on my 1996 album *Eskimo in the Sun*. Click [here](#) to listen. *Big bobaloo kahuna*.)

During this reset (1) go minimalist and (2) feed the basics. Get as many distractions out of your daily quotidien as possible. Embrace your hermitude. Books. Netflix. Hikes. Meditate. Contemplate. Get healthy. Go naked. Baths (with plenty of bubbles or salts; your skin and soul will thank you). Don't overthink your principles or ambitions, just re-find your balance. That desire to make a big reach will start to stir again.

2. Apply Discipline: There's a time to be Athens, a time to be Sparta. All night decadence, all day recovery, bank-breaking adventures and other fun forms of hedonistic mischief will be waiting once you've relaunched. Athens reveled in grand displays of indulgence and creativity; Sparta in restraint and prowess. It's a moment for minimalism and structure. When resetting to first principles get your Sparta on.
3. Reaffirm: Once you've established a stable state rewrite those first principles. If you no longer believe them, change them. If you never had them, craft them. What do you stand for now? What is your personal doctrine? What needs to be said about you at your eulogy? Find that supreme North Star that guides all of your actions and major decisions. A distilled, incontestable, single statement of your name here *raison d'être*. Stew on it, write it, test it, reshape it, and then honor it.

Companies refer to their first principles as a mission statement. Some good examples:

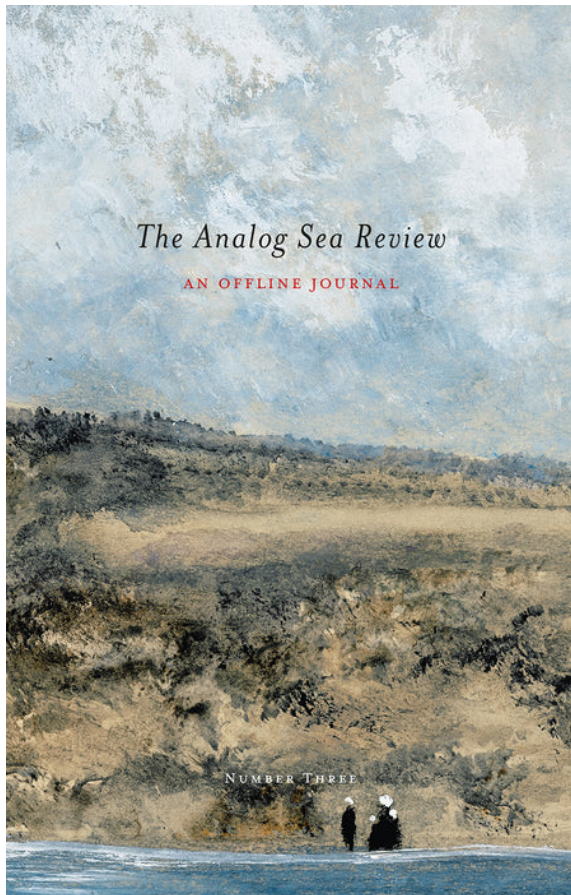
BBC: *To enrich people's lives with programs and services that inform, educate and entertain.*

Walmart: *We save people money so they can live better.*

GE: *We bring good things to life.*

A powerful mission statement propels all employees toward a common, worthy, and clearly-defined corporate goal. Your first principles should similarly get you oriented toward a bright North Star, cutting through all the turbulence and lulls that separate now and the realization of your grand life ambitions. What gift do you want to leave behind? This will help get you there.

Two final notes:



A big thank you to Jonathan Simons. Our chat at Mana Cafe in January pulled me out of my creative stupor and back to first principles; the breakthrough mentioned above. Jonathan is the founding editor and publisher of *The Analog Sea Review*, a collection of poetry, essays, fiction, and fine art for those “wishing to maintain contemplative life in the digital age.” He is a most inspiring purist, unavailable by email, text, or phone (he doesn’t own one). No online presence, no digital wake. Exchanges require pen and paper. I love it. If *The Analog Sea Review* is not yet available in your neighborhood bookstore, please press them to carry it. Contact me for an introduction if curious.

To those of you whose grand ambitions center on artistic creation, if you too are toiling in anonymity take solace in the fact that some of history’s most revered artists – Schubert, Van Gogh, and Brontë being just 3 examples – left this world still largely unappreciated outside their small circle of supporters. This did not, however, corrupt their artistic vision or provoke them to toward conformity. Be provoked; never conform. If you are to be remembered for

anything it will be that singular gift that only you could offer.

Published initially on February 6, 2022.

Catch That Buzz

Suggested Song: [Love is the Drug](#), Roxy Music

Suggested Drink: [Botanical Buzz cocktail](#): vodka, honey syrup, lemon juice.

This simple, emphatic text was sitting in my WhatsApp box this morning:

“Just finished!”

No more needed said. A close friend has been working on a massive creative project for the past 3+ years. Blinders-on, head-down mode has been *le rigueur* since early 2021; behind schedule, under fire, and digging hard. I could almost feel his endorphin flood when tapping that final period of the last sentence of his closing chapter. *YES!*

Endorphins are hormones in our brains; large molecule neuropeptides that temper pain and lighten our moods when stressed out. Open that valve wide enough and a sense of euphoria sweeps over us like a Hokusai wave. It feels amazing and has a lot of health benefits to boot. Google it.



Exercise can provoke endorphins into action. The runners' high, yeah, that's it. So can a burst of laughter or a slow hot bath (or for that matter slow hot sex, reportedly). These activities hit the pleasure buttons hard, which release our peptide friends and make us feel even better. A virtuous up-cycle. Oh yeah, give me more of that!

The easiest avenues to endorphin nirvana come through acts of achievement, ours and with those in our love circle. Parenting offers plenty of moments: opening a near perfect report card or watching your child accept a diploma in her cap and gown (their pride is our joy; I get weepy). Work too can be fertile ground: learning that you just earned a hard-sought promotion or year-end bonus; getting the news that a new client (the one you've been jumping through hoops to woo) is coming on board; passing your CPA exam or the state bar after months of study.

At some point post midlife our kids graduate to their own lives, we retire from core careers, and slow hot sex becomes less common (reportedly). The need for regular endorphin boosts remains acutely important for emotional wellbeing, however. What to do, what to do?

Buzz fishing

There are plenty of natural-high options outside of kids and work, of course, but not through the usual pleasure activities associated with retirement: boozy golf outings, vacation cruises, trips to see the grandkids. These things can make us feel happy, but a vitamin E *BANG!* tends to come from the big moments of achievement as mentioned above.

So how do you catch that buzz? The good news is the opportunities are endless. Flow-inducing activities are prime ground, throwing your natural strengths and passions into projects of real challenge. My brother bought a crumbling french estate and built it into a stunning countryside showcase, mostly through his own labor. My friend Laura joined a sailboat racing crew in the Caribbean. Oh, she also started [a school for elementary kids in Haiti](#), a challenge on an entirely different level!

Artistic endeavors offer all the key conditions for massive endorphic (made up word) release. They demand an intense amount of concentration and effort, then a moment of exhausted, exhilarating completion. Most creatives love the journey but surely look forward to the *IT'S DONE!* finale. When the last brush stroke is applied, the final period punctuated, or recording production mixed and mastered. These types of moments provide emancipation from a deeply rewarding but all-consuming journey of love.

At my side hustle the [Interprize Group](#) we embolden people to pursue audacious life ambitions of deep personal meaning. We'll get you mainlining the endorphin buzz. Reach out to learn more, or just swing by Provence for week. I'll get you sorted.

Published initially on February 25, 2022.

The Gods of Song

Suggested Song: [I Won't Miss You - Demo](#), Bill Magill

Suggested Drink: [Continuum cocktail](#): Gin, Vermouth, Chartreuse, Cynar, Curaçao.

A good friend stopped by the apartment yesterday for a glass of rosé (okay, a bottle) and a bit of catching up. I pulled out my trusted Martin D35 and played a new song – “I Won’t Miss You” – that will make it onto the upcoming EP, and I asked for his thoughts. Through the years I’ve gotten invaluable feedback from this practice; a living room debut with some work-in-progress tune still half baked. Maybe it needs another verse or change in tempo. The suggestion yesterday was about dynamics: perhaps bring it up a bit here, take it back down there. The song is suddenly immeasurably better.

(Note to artists of all stripes: inviting criticism is essential. Know when to accept it; know when to stick to your creative instincts.)



Starry Night, Van Gogh

Where does the creative flame come from? Van Gogh’s glowing starscapes, T Monk’s jumpy piano rhythms? A magic well of inventiveness deep inside our grey folds of neurons, peptides, and proteins? Neuroscientists see synapses sparking in the anterior cingulate cortex and left inferior parietal lobule when artists get their grooves on. That reveals the brain regions being aroused, but what does it tell us

about the true source of inspiration? Is it chemical, physical, some kernel of protein pre-programmed before birth?

The Gods of Song

The Law of Conservation dictates that energy, whether thermal, electrical, mechanical, or other, can neither be created nor destroyed, simply transformed (first postulated by Émilie du Châtelet, a brilliant mathematician and close companion to Voltaire. ... ah the French and their love of entangled affairs!). Can creative energy be governed by the same law?

Imagine that the gods of song lord over the reallocation – but not creation or destruction – of all musical creativity. They glean the energy burning off musical dynamism – the teenage frenzy at a Beatles concert; the rapture of baronesses swooning at a Mozart recital – blend it with other tuneful emissions of emotion at any given moment, recycle it, distill it, reshape it, then gaze down from upon high for the best possible artist at that particular moment to reinterpret it.



This process steps through a lot of conversions, as does power from original source to your wall outlet, but the principle of conservation remains inviolate, honoring Madame de Châtelet's original premise. No mystical origination deep in the limbic system at debut, no final extinction in the cemetery-of-song at end.

Antennas Up

As a creative you need to keep the receptors up at all times. The gods above are constantly surveying the flock for the perfect agents of delivery: who to best capture these water lilies in Giverny, the stars over Saint Rémy, to take this newly formed bundle of musical melancholy and write something tender about love lived and lost. The energy is floating in the ether. It just needs the right channel for conveyance. And that just might be you, if your creative soul is pure and open to divine inspiration.

A final note that I'm not the first musician to believe in the gods of song. You can find interviews with some of our greatest lyricists, the Dylans and Caves and Cohens, who claim that the process is as mysterious to them as anyone, that when inspired they are just a medium for the message and spill it out. The key? Stay inspired, live deeply, keep the heart open to joy and pain and all emotions in between, and always keep that figurative brush and palette close at hand.

Published initially on March 26, 2022.

Of Loyalty, Fealty, and New Beginnings

Suggested song: [My Back Pages](#), Bob Dylan (I love this 1967 version by The Byrds)

Suggested drink: [Signature Zinfandel](#), Seghosio Winery, Healdsburg, California

Things we've owned

I bought this Suzuki F-100 acoustic in 1978, at a pawn shop in Waco, Texas. It was priced at \$150 and didn't play particularly well. The action left my fingertips aching and its intonation up the neck was dreadful. It did, however, have an unexpectedly beautiful tone that touched me. I played it, put it down, played it again, then down again. After a few cycles the hook was set and haggle began. An hour later I drove home with my first 6 string guitar.

I had arrived in Waco that August to start college in the fall. I was fresh off the farm, just dumped by a girlfriend (who was soon pregnant to a good friend back home), penniless and clueless to the world as a new-born lamb. Learning to play that guitar was the best therapy possible for this heartbroken, homesick hippy lost in a land of redneck cowboys and supersized pickups. Guthrie, Nelson, and Dylan were my teachers, memorizing their playbooks and learning their simple chord structures. Two years in Texas gave me 2 educations: laser jock and guitar picker. Both would take my life in unexpected directions over the next 40 years. (Another essay.)



The Suzuki has found a home at Alexandra's place in San Francisco, where I stay when in town. My boys have learned on it, just as dad did. I love having an instrument in the house when visiting, and I polish and restring it once per year (whether needed or not). While much better guitars have come and gone from the Magill collection, I just can't sell this humble beauty. I still run through my set list of folk classics from the giants mentioned above and am transported back to those younger years in Waco. It's magic. To some things we remain loyal.

Places we've lived

I'm in San Francisco for 2 weeks. There's a wedding to attend and I never miss a chance to see my kids. And I still love the city by the bay. I lived more than 20 years in this town, going to university, getting



married, buying a home and raising a family, launching a career, playing my music in clubs (that required better guitars), and chasing a thousand dreams through its foggy shroud.

San Francisco wasn't my first stop after Texas. A new job brought me into the region and weekends free brought me into the city. There's a mystery and romance to this town that preys on dreamers, that gets under your skin. That path has been well trod through the decades: sailors and miners; beats and hippies; techies and investors; everyone panning for gold. There are other amazing cities for lost romantics: Paris, London, and New York offer all the essentials. But San Francisco is the one that fed my wanderlust.

I know every green park and gritty alley of San Francisco, the dim sum palaces and Mexican taquerias, the coziest Italian cafés for a rainy afternoon and dog-eared paperback. There are

always newer, hotter spots in a trending city like this. I haunt the places that matter. City Lights Bookstore, the Tadich Grill, Mario's in North Beach, the Lone Palm bar on 22nd Street.

I still get goosebumps waiting for a downtown train in the Sunset, the cool ocean brume drifting up Sloat Avenue, the blue Pacific glimmering in the distance, the rattle of MUNI street cars, the anticipation of another night in Baghdad by the Bay. To some places we remain loyal.

Of loyalty and fealty

Don't confuse fealty with loyalty. Our former president is a case study in this allusion. His continued dominance over the Republican cult (was once a party) is easy to rationalize. He still commands a large and enduring following that can determine elections. If you want his nod prepare to go prone and grovel.

At the peak Trump's Twitter accounts had almost 90 million followers and he garnered 33 million likes on Facebook. He still brings out the MAGA United despite having nothing new to share. The election was stolen, radical liberal judges are on a political witch hunt, his call with Zelensky was perfect. Rewind and repeat. But because of his unquestionable appeal to their voter base most all Republican politicians – congressmen, governors, state and local representatives – sing his glories and pledge their allegiance. He would be well served not to confuse this show of fealty with loyalty.

Hitler, too, was a messiah to the masses and his staff of sycophants and nationalists fell fervently into goosestep behind him. But at some point, all *emperors with no clothes* get the big reveal, and when that happens the façade of invincibility evaporates in a flash, then the worship. In Hitler's case that started with a bad spanking in Stalingrad and the fall of North Africa in 1943. When the Allies pincer in from the boot of Italy and the beaches of Normandy that shroud of supremacy dissolved quickly. Confidence had so waned by 1944 that attempts on his life were being conspired by his closest advisors.



Trump still wears the robe of a king maker today, but the moment the surety of his nod loses its guarantee (his man in Nebraska just went down in flames) the fetid taint of his association will far out-stink its questionable influence. Expect the fall to be fast and ugly. Suck-ups who've *trafficked* (*prostituted* might too harsh, but then again...) their allegiance for ratings or votes – the Vances and Hannitys and Gaetzs – will abandon Trump World like rats from the Titanic. Well, maybe not Matt Gaetz. Even Hitler had his Goebbels.

New beginnings

The wedding in Healdsburg was a beautiful affair. The wine country north of San Francisco shares a climate and culture with my own part of the world now along the Mediterranean rim. Warm days, cool nights, long summers, beautiful people. Endless fields of trellised vines and charming towns that revolve around all things white, red, and rosé. Trendy restaurants for the loaded (in both senses) and humbler options for the less well-heeled.

One person missing from the family gathering, a key person, was my sister Cathy, who passed away suddenly 4 years ago. And joining us was my brother-in-law's new *friend*. Welcoming her into the group was easy. She was warm, open but not overeager, respectful and making an effort, and I imagined keen to be embraced by the fold. Doing so felt like a turn of the page, a moving on, a door firmly and finally closed, while a new one was opened. Cathy was gone and also her chair from this and future family tables. It left me off balance.

I have thought a lot about loyalty since the wedding and accepted that it's not a zero-sum game. Steve's decision to move on with his life is neither disloyal to my sister's memory nor to us, her family. And I can honor her memory and remain loyal to a guy who filled her life with kids, comfort, and happiness. There's a connection to my sister that Steve enables, the flash of warm moments we all spent together. He deserves only happiness with the possibilities ahead, and every evening I'll continue to light a candle to Cathy's memory.

Onward.

Published initially on May 17, 2022.

Rule #8

Suggested song: [Leap of Faith](#), Bruce Springsteen

Suggested drink: [Paternel Rosé](#), AOP Côtes de Provence (any pale Provence rosé should do!)

“Make your life a lot more fucking awesome.”

- Nitin Sharma

I was reading an essay on *Medium* this morning, hovered over a bowl of Special K, muesli, and local strawberries. Nitin, a full-time programmer and part-time purveyor of millennial wisdom, was offering his 8 rules on “how to rewrite your life as you want it to be.” It was a slow news day. I was looking for distraction.

Rules 1 through 7 were the trite pulp one tends to find from the newly enlightened: honor yourself, follow a healthy diet, appreciate nature, yada yada. (Fair admission: I’m guilty of dispensing similar banal obviousness on occasion.) But Rule #8 struck a chord, and it wasn’t just the F bomb. Here’s why.

Every single one of us wants an f-ing awesome life. At 50 I was incredibly blessed and more than a little lucky to have had this: money, security, job, home, spouse, kids, grill. It was pretty damn good, but not f-ing awesome.

When my mid-life wobble met my inner narcissist there was little resistance to the axiom *your life is not a dress rehearsal (so grab it)*. I bade my goodbyes to all above (except the kids) and went in search of my Shangri-La, El Dorado, Elysian Fields. I wanted more than money, more than stability, more than bliss. I’d trade all this and more (a great Dead Boys song, by the way) for a truly authentic life of deep personal meaning in an enchanting, inspiring locale: now that would be pretty f-ing awesome.

(Note that nowhere in that last sentence do you find the words affluence, comfort, or happiness.)

I found my Shangri-La in Provence, France. Yours will call too should you pursue the quest. Please trust me on this. Beyond the seductive splendor of its lavender fields, turquoise seas, and perched village cafés serving chilled rosé on hot endless days, I found my tribe in Provence. Seekers, most with impressive career and personal credentials, who will tell you that *yeah that thing before was pretty damn good, but not f-ing awesome*.



[Click the image to watch a beautiful video of Aix-en-Provence by Sam Fournier.](#)

Sometimes we take it for granted, those of us who've washed up on these shores, but then a jealous friend on holiday or tourist at the next table will ask how one makes it all work. The language and legal and financial and family barriers and considerations.

Just figure it out.

A fellow runaway here once answered it quite simply like this: *you just have to figure it out*. This is what he meant: few of us here are independently wealthy; most of us have kids; all of us have/had aging parents back home; visa issues are rampant; and our language isn't native. This further complicates already complicated things like tax regulations, wi-fi outages, parent-teacher mediations, and ordering that second rosé bottle (Bill, doesn't ask for *another please*, it's better to say *one more of the same!*). You just have to figure it out.

My friend Dickie ran a high-stress, high-pay trading desk in Hong Kong for 10 years. These days he gives leisurely walking tours around Aix-en-Provence and fronts a local rock-n-roll band, while helping raise 3 teen daughters. Life? *Yeah, pretty awesome, just figure it out.*

Tilly was a BBC producer in London traveling across the globe to film nature documentaries. Now she's at home in her small Aix workshop, turning out beautifully delicate ceramic bowls and creative pieces of jewelry. That's when she's not parked by the sea in the vintage family travel trailer, book in hand and watching her daughter paddle board across the placid Mediterranean blue. Life? *Yeah, pretty awesome, just figure it out.*

I abandoned my profession, divorced my wife (and closest ally, still), and moved to France in 2010. I had no real plan and no backup. A Wallenda moment. A part-time teaching job and a bit of advisory work helped, and I found, finally, the time and energy to develop my real passions: workshops on life change, a book, an album, and a musical.

Don't expect all confetti and champagne in your pursuit of a life that is pretty f-ing awesome. It's not the goal. My financial plan was never sustainable and remains tenuous. My creative projects have gone largely unnoticed, some have failed. Face plants can be humiliating. You soldier on. No regrets.

I've been scolded for the irresponsibility, most heatedly by myself. I've worried about the impact on my kids: a year or 2 with dad in French lycées, then back to mom and San Francisco schools, and then back to dad. But, 12 years later I'm where I belong. And each of my 3 little bumpkins have grown into fascinating, multicultural young adults of amazing potential. Life? *Pretty awesome, just figure it out.*

The takeaway

Your life now is indeed not a dress rehearsal. Forget all that stuff about heavens and reincarnations and molecular transmogrifications into other forms of pixie dust existence. It's all wishful hooey. This is it, your one single shot.

You can do *at least* one thing better than any other individual on this planet.

So, to do what? Well, you can do *at least* one thing better than any other individual on this planet. This nonpareil gift is enabled simply by that unique blend of genes, upbringing, education, friends, and experiences that make you you. Finding your Shangri-La – geographically and emotionally – will help release the potential.

If you can pair that unique mastery with your deepest passions, then we all gain in your amazing gift. And you get to live a life that is *pretty f-ing awesome*. Now go grab it.

Published initially on June 29, 2022.

The Case for Blissful Obliviousness

Suggested Song: [All Day and All of the Night](#), The Kinks.

Suggested Drink: [Negroni Sbagliato](#): Prosecco, Campari, Sweet Vermouth.

“Ignorance is bliss.”

- Thomas Gray

It's August. Provence is baking, as per normal, and most likely where you are too, whether normal or not. There's a daily regime here for the hottest weeks of summer. Open the home early to the cool dawn air. Run, market, yoga, and whatever other physical activities that demand that daily check mark get checked by mid-morning. Keep lunch copious but light. Salad, veggies, and fruits from the morning's market crawl are perfect. Shutters close against the mid-day sun and remain so through the Saharan afternoon; windows open to any hint of circulation. Fans in every room. Nap, write, read through the day. Maybe there's a good matinee at the dark, cool cinema. One can hope.

I sit at Le Forum with Canadian Dave and drink a cold pint of Kronenbourg. By 6 pm the sun has tempered from scorching to toasty. Tables under the large terrace parasols are at a premium. The water-misting fans feel heavenly. *Kat, another two beers please.*

This is the bewitching hour; dusk on the urban Serengeti. Beasts old and young emerge restless to mingle and run.

Children shout and play tag, their parents order Aperol spritzes and stay in view. Gazelles nimble past in flowing white linen. Teens huddle in clumps, the boys here, the girls there, subtle (but not too subtle) glances pass between.



The summer shutter system. Bill's apartment in Aix-en-Provence.

August is not conducive to creative, high-throughput production of any sort, at least here in Provence. Our natural cooling system labors with the challenge, the mind struggles to focus, and anyhow why insist? We all need the reset, a hard reboot. Europeans understand this and vacation en masse. France runs at half tempo. Luckily, Le Forum will keep its taps on and parasols open.

Time to fill.

With free time comes options. Access to the world is as easy as a lift of the laptop screen. The BBC, New York Times, NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt, San Francisco Chronicle, France24, and La Provence keep me on top of all developments, from global to local, essential to superfluous, by the minute. Online media produces an astounding, unrelenting volume of news coverage.



Henny-Penny, by J. Austin Miller

Competition for cyber readers, viewers, and listeners is hyper-intense. Alarmism and fearmongering deliver the ears and eyeballs. Fox News is the undisputed master of this Henny-Penny shuffle in America and has the numbers to prove it: more viewers than its two closest competitors combined. This summer's bombardment from the outlets is particularly dire. Wars, weather, disease, ... *this just in, the sky is falling!!* (and cue foreboding music).

The choice: plugged-in anxiety, or blissful oblivion.

In the August heat I choose to be oblivious. You should consider it as well. Conscious ignorance pairs nicely with the summer downshift, and there is little merit in agitation; it will only make you hotter. On

Le Forum's terrace one can debate China's Taiwan invasion plans, or instead make a claim for the best market stalls or Provence rosés. Something like this:

Bandol or Palette?

For rosé? Well, yeah both excellent, but frankly I'm loyal to the Coteaux d'Aix. I'm thinking that the local strawberries are just past their peak. Have you noticed?

Definitely, but the Cavaillon melons are in full sugar. I just follow the bees to find the best stalls. Speaking of which, the Saturday market at Place Richelme is exceptional this summer.

Yeah, I guess, but the marchands at Place des Prêcheurs remain mes préférés. And anyhow, Claudia, the girl with the stall offering the amazing legumes farcis, ... too cute. Now let me tell you about my new recipe for Italian bruschetta

Kat, 2 more beers please.

So which sounds more relaxing? Something like that, or a lengthy discourse on how to dodge Chinese space junk?

There are a few things you can control at the moment: where you shop, what you eat, with whom you share time. There are a lot of things over which you have absolutely no control this August. Here's a short list:

- An untethered Putin
- An emboldened Xi
- A politicized Supreme Court
- Prices shooting up
- The economy slowing down
- A stock market in free fall
- The US west in flames
- The US east under water
- The first wave of Monkeypox
- The next wave of Covid
- A falling Chinese rocket booster
- The SF Giants (they are playing horribly)

This August I will focus on topics of interest within my minuscule domain of control. As for the relentlessly alarmist, 24/7 news dump I'll choose obliviousness.

Filling time

Taking the no-news pledge for a slow summer month is easy enough. Filling the free time; that's the pickle for the news-cycle obsessive. It's a particularly vexing cornichon for me.

It helps to have a new project, something not on the standard calendar. I've chosen Italy and primed my enthusiasm with a jump across the border this week. It's a seductive country in all manner of ways: the landscape, weather, architecture, food, people, and daily rhythms to name a few. All were on full display for 2 days in the seaside town of Ospedaletti, less than a 3-hour drive from my home in Aix (how lucky is that?).

Freshly inspired, a new Italian recipe collection has been started (after the market crawl this morning I made a tomato bruschetta; simple and delicious, like the best Italian dishes). Any Italian films at the art house cinemas in Aix will get a viewing. And I'll see what my friends at Book and Bar have in stock for authors. An Umberto Eco tome would soak up the spare hours (and days, and weeks...) nicely.

But perhaps the most fun will be a language course. Duolingo is free and fun and I'm on Lesson 3. When I tap out there I might ask Kat from Le Forum for a few lessons. She's a native. August is looking better. I'm feeling clueless. How's your summer winding down?



A plate of fritto misto. Playa79, Ospedaletti, Italy

Published initially on July 29, 2022.

Happy

Suggested Song: [Happy](#), Pharrel Williams

Suggested Drink: [Virgin Mojito](#) (Stella's favorite drink when on the Quai in Cannes!)

I gave Stella a hug and waved goodbye, then was slightly teary on the drive home. She's on a Paris-bound train now; boarding a flight back to Los Angeles tomorrow. My daughter decided on an impromptu visit and we had the best 10 days imaginable. A jump across the Italian border for pizza and fritto misto. Hikes in Cezanne's mountain and along the dramatic Mediterranean cliffs. Morning coffees here, afternoon apéros there. Our favorite museums and restaurants and dishes at home. Provence perfect weather for autumn: cool nights, sunny days, breezy. Lots of laughs, lots of hugs. Lucky.



Cafe sitting with Stella in Cannes

I have a close, loving family. Like their sister, the boys are happy, curious, adventurous, and astounding me daily. Everyone is healthy in body and spirit. They call or text often to say “love you Dad!” Their relationship with mom is equally tender and Alexandra remains a close friend and ally, despite our divorce. We're a stable, supportive, cohesive unit with albums of photos and beautiful memories. Many more to come. Lucky.

I live in a historic building in a picture postcard city. The bones of my apartment – with its 17th century French doors and high beamed ceilings – envelop me in harmony. The ghosts of my kids wander its halls, laughing and arguing and studying and sharing meals. I may not own it, but after 12 years its soul is 100% Bill. I love to entertain, and this home was built for dinner parties. Friends walk through a historic

neighborhood of cafés, boulangeries, monuments, and fountains to arrive at my door. These things I value greatly. Lucky.

My friends are warm, interesting people. Some are creatives, some from the worlds of business or education, some committing this moment to parenting, some figuring out who they'll be next. All are a bit pirate. All enjoy a good laugh, a ready drink (even if non-alcoholic), and leave their hang-ups at home. I've been on my knees and these people have lifted me up. I've done the lifting a few times. We all need trusted companions. Lucky.

I do what I love. I get up early by choice, because the day ahead is inspiring. Every morning starts with a farmers market crawl, and most days end with a book and a cup of tea. I teach on occasion, learn constantly, create and share, and worry about the usual things like money. If I died tomorrow my kids would say, *yeah he absolutely loved it there, doing that, with those friends. He was lucky.*



The morning market, Aix-en-Provence

You don't need kids to feel lucky. You don't need an airy flat in a charming Provence town to feel lucky. Your friends don't need to be fascinating globetrotters or celebrated/aspiring artists to feel lucky. In fact, the lucky life is infinitely unique to each of us and boils down to 3 simple things: what you do, where you live, and whom you love. And those 3 basic, fundamental pillars of providence are entirely under your control.

Are you planning new adventures, scanning unexplored horizons, considering big life changes, or seeking a harmony that somehow, at some point mysteriously slipped away? You'll need a bit of luck. What, where, and with whom. Start with those.

Published initially on October 25, 2022.

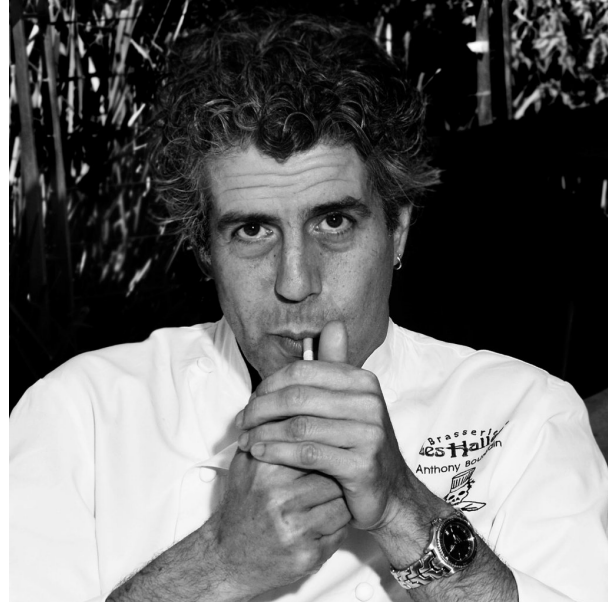
Brand New You

Suggested Song: [Changes](#), David Bowie

Suggested Drink: [Shapeshifter cocktail](#): vodka, crème de violette, lemon juice, bitters, egg white.

I had an essay on psychogeology planned to drop this week (yeah, it's a thing!), but two new biographies of Anthony Bourdain have provoked me to the point of making a last-minute swap. Extracts from the biographies are making the rounds, their authors giving interviews.

Bourdain had a large fan base to which I subscribed. *Kitchen Confidential* was an irreverent exposé of restaurant kitchen culture; a raucous reveal behind the twin swing doors. He reveled in shining a light on the soiled underbelly of something carefully manicured and disneyfied. Bourdain was the essence of punk insolence and I was punk rocker at the time. I ate it up.



Bourdain's own brand was manicured as well: culinary rascalion; acute observer of the absurd; globetrotting seeker of the strange and spicy; unapologetic provocateur; cool older dude with hot younger girlfriend. I can imagine that this fun stamp could be exhausting to maintain. We all evolve, sometimes to our friends' and fans' resistance. Schwarzenegger's bodybuilder begat terminator begat governor. The Beatles graduated from *Can't Buy Me Love* to *A Day in the Life*. Fans were unhappy, but the Fab Four were done with holding hands and love me do. Happiness is a warm gun. Transformation is essential for staying fascinated by ourselves.

Bourdain was reportedly excited about a new project that would be decidedly un-Bourdainian. Even pirates pull down the black flag at some point. One can imagine how liberating it would be, and befitting of his style, to shock the devotees with something unexpected and completely out of character. *I spent 20 years cultivating X and now I'm Y. Trust me. Join me!*

In an earlier incarnation I had a privileged life in San Francisco. It was the *greed-is-good* Gecko era and cred was built around possessions and title. My wife kept me grounded but every peacock loves to spread the feathers from time to time. I *found my wings* when I *severed the strings* (a lyrical couplet from the 2021 MASSIVE HIT [To Say Goodbye](#)) and moved to slow-and-sunny Provence from fast-and-foggy San Francisco. I knew that my professional repute and financial surety were about to become irreparably unwound, and I was elated. For I was moving towards a more natural, authentic version of myself;

correcting course towards a North Star I had always seen brightly to the side and too long denied. At a certain age denial is a very unhealthy choice.



My sense is that Bourdain was a mostly authentic guy but yearning to evolve. He was an undeniable creative and creative types don't like being boxed in. The slightest tinge of *I'm starting to feel fake* elicits the hives x10. Maybe he was finding it difficult to shape the shift, given the heavy momentum of his much-loved brand. Certainly his open history of substance issues and depression wouldn't have helped, and his relationship was

reportedly on the rocks. He loved her deeply (according to the new bios) and must have felt it slipping. That can push one into embarrassing behavior. I can relate more than I want to admit, and perhaps is why I felt compelled to pen this rumination.

We all need to be aware of the gravity of our brand and the effort required to escape said pull, if indeed that's what is needed to grow and thrive. It's a very healthy thing, mandatory I'd suggest, to question our identity regularly and tweak where needed; destroy when required. If surrounded by people who love you in a place that nurtures you then you'll be fine. Actually, much better than fine, you'll be alive.

Ch ch ch changes.....

Published initially on October 29, 2022.

Thanks Giving

Suggested Song: [I Thank You](#), Sam & Dave (See ZZ Top's [amazing live rendition](#), 2011)

Suggested Drink: Your favorite herbal tea. (Pure joy on a cold night with a good book.)

“Piglet noticed that even though he had a Very Small Heart,
it could hold a rather large amount of Gratitude.”

- A.A. Milne

The Place des Cardeurs is the largest open plaza in Aix-en-Provence. A city block long and half as wide, the Cardeurs is ringed by restaurants and cafés and wine bars and beer pubs and gelaterias. It’s dining and drinking al fresco; open air in the summer, then under those large canvas and plastic tents the French have mastered through the years. *Eat inside? But how would I smoke?*

Weekend evenings in the Cardeurs are loud and collegiate, with throngs of students (there are over 30,000 in Aix) enjoying cheap drinks deep into the night. A chorus of laughs and chatter under strings of festive lights. Sundays awaken quiet and calm, with families and kids commandeering the massive terraced savannah, now void of the sea of tables and chairs from the evening’s bacchanalia. *Off you go Junior, run that endless battery down while your mother and I enjoy a slow coffee.*

It is to the Place des Cardeurs one comes for that Sunday afternoon glass late in the season. For, with its large expanse and low-slung periphery of buildings, the Cardeurs is the most promising spot in town to catch a few fleeting rays of hibernal sun. It seems to barely reach mid-sky during the Provence winters; a lazy ball that’s up late and done early. But it manages to arc just above the south-facing roofline through the afternoon, casting silhouettes of the tangle of unemployed antennas and vent pipes and chimneys.



Caffe Cardeurs, mid-afternoon on the last Sunday of November 2022

The Winter Mood

Darker, colder days like these can shroud a winter malaise over the cheeriest amongst us. I tend to stay buoyant but have family and good friends who can get gloomy, and I have seen what a demon that can be to wrestle. I follow a winter strategy to fend off despair: (1) lean into the season and (2) inoculate against melancholy with a regime of winter indulgences and rituals.

I lean in mostly with what I eat (lots of stews and soups), when I sleep (early), what I read (long tomes for long evenings), and whom I see (just a lucky few). As for rituals, I light the apartment with candles, spend money on bath salts, listen to Coltrane and Chet Baker while making dinner, and take an inside table at Lulu's ([click here](#) for her menu of the week). These things I never do in the summer, except for the occasional Baker.

Rather than resisting the seasonal change, you might try embracing your winter hermit with arms wide. Retreat into your cave. Build your books-to-read stack. Re-up Netflix. Knit (kidding, consider any home craft). Nest. Bears do it. Squirrels do it. I do it. Try it. Spring will bring a sharper contrast in light, warmth, friends, and merriment. The buds and blooms will seem somehow more extraordinary, more appreciated. (For a fascinating rumination on hermitude and recluses read Michael Finkel's [A Stranger in the Woods: The Extraordinary Story of the Last True Hermit](#).)

Your Best Defense Against the Blues

The Thanksgiving holiday is a reminder that beyond the turkey and football (in both variations this fall), gratitude is a healthy addition to the winter regime. Giving thanks is the low-hanging fruit of happiness and effective at fending off the winter blues. If you need a positivity boost when the days are dark, expressing gratitude is the easiest and most impactful ritual you can adopt. Its power in building resistance to the dark side has been studied extensively.



Through his cutting-edge studies, [Robert Emmons](#), professor of psychology at my alma mater UC Davis, has shown that gratitude “can lower blood pressure, improve immune function and facilitate more efficient sleep. Gratitude reduces lifetime risk for depression, anxiety and substance abuse disorders, and is a key resiliency factor in the prevention of suicide.” All can feel acute in the dark

months. His findings match those by other thought leaders in the happiness field, such as Barbara Fredrickson (UNC Chapel Hill), Sonja Lyubomirsky (UC Riverside), and Martin Seligman (UPenn).

Gratitude journals, gratitude letters, gratitude circles; these are just a few of the options available to practice the practice, something we do in our Interprize workshops. You can find endless links to infinite articles online about this stuff. For more rigorous findings and suggestions, search on the names in the previous paragraph. What works best for me: a simple end-of-the-month inventory of people and things to which I am grateful. I keep it short – 5 or fewer – and don't dwell on what or who misses the cut, ... there is always next month.

If interested in the Bill Magill November gratitude list, I offer it here in no certain order. This past month I have been deeply grateful for:

1. *My adventurous grandparents' talent at staying alive* (or I wouldn't be typing this now). My maternal grandfather managed to survive the trench warfare of WW I as part of the Canadian forces fighting in France. About 67,000 of them didn't make the return, another 4x that number were injured. Chances of making it home unscathed was less than 1 in 2. He was short and perhaps that helped keep the helmet low. Papa made it home.

My fraternal grandmother, just out of college, travelled south to teach at the [Calhoun Colored School](#) in deep Alabama in early 1900s. She was part of an alliance of northerners committed to the education of post-slavery children in a deeply segregated south. The Klan were no fans of such enlightened idealism. Educated white women elevating poor black kids; what was next, the vote?! As that wasn't enough excitement, she later took a steamer from New York City to Alexandria, Egypt, alone, and then continued on to the Sudan where she married my Irish grandfather, traveling amongst the villagers and crocodiles and malaria. They made it back to the US in 1 piece, had a pack of kids including my dad, and in 1957 my tiny zygote squiggled into the world.

2. *The brilliance of the classic novel [A Confederacy of Dunces](#)*. It kept a grin planted on my face through the entire month. Sadly, its author John Kennedy Toole ended his life in 1969, shortly after completing the novel. It took his loyal mother 11 years to find a publisher, but his genius and her perseverance were awarded with a Pulitzer posthumously in 1981. (Many thanks to Canadian Dave for lending me his dog-eared copy.)

3. *My daughter's impulsiveness*. This call I got in October:

“Hey dad, I had a great tip week at work and was thinking of coming for a quick visit.”

(From LA.)

“Fantastic Stella, when?”

“Uhhh, tomorrow?”

Melt.

Fortunately her mother works for United Airlines. You gotta love those standby perks.

4. *The American voter and US court system for protecting that right.* The large slate of kooky candidates running this fall on a platform of 2020 election denial – one has to admire this cult's tenacious cling to disproven fantasy – was universally denied at the ballot box. And the courts, up to the Supremes, shot down the many attempts across numerous states at voter suppression. The people's voices were heard and counted. Democracy triumphed. Whew!

5. *The craftsmanship of my Martin guitar.* I bought this D35 acoustic in 1989 new, an MBA graduation gift to myself (*Bill, you are so amazing you deserve a reward!*). With its lifetime guarantee I can walk into any certified Martin repair shop around the world and have it refretted, trued out, and tuned up for free. Its tone has only gotten warmer through the years and the body of spruce and Brazilian rosewood still looks beautiful. If curious to take a look see I made this [tutorial video](#) last week on how to play *Little Bird*. Even with the cheap recording acoustics of my tiny iPhone its sound quality is unmistakable.

Published initially on November 30, 2022.

Of Sense and Sensuality

Suggested Song: [Strawberry Fields Forever](#), The Beatles

Suggested Drink: [Cherub's Cup Cocktail](#): Strawberries, lemon juice, vodka, elderflower liqueur, sparkling rosé.

It's springtime in Provence. The colors and smells of local markets have shifted notably with the sudden onset of warmer weather. Local strawberries, asparagus, and artichokes fill the market stalls with their vivid reds and greens. The sweet fragrance of the berries mixes with the earthy scent of fresh basil and mint, bunched in bouquets and piled in leafy mounds. The seductive mix tugs on my senses from a distance. So very unfair. Well now it's impossible to leave without a purchase.



Strawberries at the Aix-en-Provence market, mid-May 2023

I was at a friend's home in the countryside last weekend. The fields by his cottage were flooded in bright red poppies, their delicate petals spread wide to the sun and swaying gently. Larks were whistling in a distant tree line. Wisteria blooms hung in heavy lavender clumps in his garden. His daughter called me over to give them a sniff. It was the peak of the day and we opened a bottle of chilled rosé, put out some Greek olives. Sensation overdose. Healthy hedonism.

The merits of indulgence

I love this time of year; that fresh spring dawn after a long winter night (which has its own merits; see previous essay). Rebirth and new plans. Stimulation and inspiration and so many things to smell, taste, hear, see, and share. It fuels a deep sense of revival and limitlessness.

This indulgence of the senses, this spring sensuality is a great equalizer. Fresh-picked strawberries taste no better to the millionaire than the pauper. A hillside full of poppies looks no more stunning. One could argue that those with little appreciate these things more deeply than those with lots, but I won't argue that. I have plenty of friends from both ends of that spectrum. It has less to do with wealth, more to do with a deep respect for those joys that only nature can conjure, that cannot be improved upon with more money. It brings us all together, to wonder at it all, and indulge.

Wade deeply into your senses, be seduced, swish them around like a good wine, close your eyes and become the sponge, savor, ... life will feel richer and you may live longer. This is true actually, and backed up with empirical evidence. Research at Victoria University in New Zealand (by Erica Chadwick) and Harvard (by Jordi Quoidbach) identify the many benefits of savoring, including stronger relationships, improved emotional health, and enhanced creativity. All are known to favor more happy years above the dirt.

Fred Bryant, a social psychologist at Loyola University, has written extensively on this topic, including in his 2006 book [Savoring: A New Model of Positive Experience](#). Bryant offers a variety of tips on training that savoring muscle. I condense it down to 3:

- *Awareness*. Be acutely conscious of the moment you engage a sensation; something you smell or taste or hear or see. Go slow, ponder its effect, decipher. Luxuriate in the tingle (go on, you deserve it), immerse wholly, be the sponge.
- *Sharing*. Share the moments and joys of sensory entanglement with others. Build bonds through the heady indulgence. There is no single factor more important to living longer, happier lives than close relationships. (Skeptical? Well Harvard say so! [Click here](#).)
- *Gratitude*. Simple indulgences shared with close friends are blessings. Respect your good fortune. Epicurus is surely smiling down at you. Embrace the pleasures and never take them for granted. Be humble, be grateful, and invite the happiness.

Protection from temptation

Of course there may be those who find this concept of sense and sensuality a bit too scandalous. Market strawberries dipped in Swiss chocolate, ... and hand fed to me while in recline?! Abhorrent!

For those of you in this frightful camp, fear not, there is hope. The best prophylactic against incitement of the senses? That portable portal to all things digital, pixelated, and synthetic. It slips in your pocket and holds neatly in your hand. Never leave home without it. Your phone.

Arousal of the senses requires earthly engagement. Smelling things, tasting things, touching things, hearing things, and all of this done organically. It comes with a bit of dirt under the fingernails, a sunburn on the cheeks, your feet may get wet. For all the marvels of modern technology - and I have built a career around this stuff - it will never hack mother earth and the sensuality she offers.



Woman Reclining by a Lake, Edward Cucuel

The phone is a perfect prophylactic against these primal, libidinous stimulations. For those who prefer digital approximation and virtual isolation to deep and dirty organic engagement. Why talk with the friend at your side when you can text to your friend at a distance. And when those 2 swap places you can text with the former sidekick. *Missing you!* ❤️ See, no need to actually engage in spontaneous, interactive dialog. We used to call that a conversation. Quant.

Strawberries? Plenty of photos online, and of flowers too. Just google it! You don't even need to learn their names. I'm sure you can find an influencer or 2 in Provence with plenty of staged and artificially filtered photos. As far as the smell, taste, and touch of something organic and alive, ... eww, that might require an antiseptic. Thank god for Apple.

Before I close, an open offer:

The outdoor markets in France are amazing in their variety, respect for all things local and seasonal, and great prices (no middle men!). The markets in Provence are the best in France, ... well I'm biased. If you

are passing through Aix-en-Provence and interested in a market crawl together get in touch (bill@interprizegroup.com). This is a pleasure for the senses that I love to share.

Published initially on May 15, 2022.

One Year Later

Suggested Song: [Tradition](#), from Fiddler on the Roof.

Suggested Drink: Mint tea: green tea, fresh mint leaves, sugar. Moroccan tradition calls for it to be served 3 times: “The first glass is as gentle as life, the second is as strong as love, the third is as bitter as death.”

I enjoy religious traditions for the food with friends. Honey-dipped apples on Rosh Hashanah, a lamb tajine to break Ramadan, Christmas dinner followed by the equally revered American football. Spirituality is found in a savory meal shared with people you love and most appreciate. The real magic is bubbling in the kitchen, those moms (and occasional dads) doubled over a pot or pan, or sliding some massive bird out of the oven. For me these are the true healers and most divine.

Sacred holidays encourage observers to consider their blessings for the past year (as opposed to New Year’s Eve, which is all about resolutions for the one ahead). They also challenge us to contemplate death; to be grateful that Mr. Grim again missed our doorstep, but consider those obligations to which we aspire should our luck run out before the next celebration.

This is not a morose exercise. Quite the contrary, it’s a provocation to leap forward by looking back, to get our houses in order and ambitions pursued.



Apples coated in honey (yum!).

Why did I matter?

How will I be remembered?

Whom had I served?

Was the past year helpful in answering these questions? Most importantly, dear reader, when you sit at this same table of celebration next year (should Mr. Grim again miss your door) will you be closer to answering these questions?

I have a fascination with this theme and written more than a few *Postcards* about the merits of embracing our mortality – okay, perhaps *accepting* is a more comfortable word – and doing something about it, ... now. With sunny titles like [The Dead and the Dying](#) and [Prepare to Die](#) I’m starting feel like Mr. Grim myself. But Rosh Hoshanah, starting today, offers another kitchen tradition for us all – from Jews to heretics like myself – to gather at the table, share in our good fortunes, and imagine what we’ll talk about at the next annual gathering.

On a more reverent note, today also marks the 1 year anniversary of the death of Mahsa Amini, brutally murdered by the morality police in Tehran for the sin of not having her hair properly covered in public. She was a country girl with big dreams. College and law school and who knows what more. She had just stepped off the bus that sunny morning in Tehran. I imagine her small-town wonder at this big bustling city and all of its possibilities, the cafes and bazaars and city sounds and people, ... the buzz and energy. This was taken from her, and her gift was taken from us.



Mahsa Amini (2000-2022)

We cannot forget Mahsa, or Jina as she was known to her Kurdish family. We must keep that candle burning bright as a torch, not only to her but all the women in this world suffering from the oppression of righteous men who know just how *to keep them in their goddam place*.

Like most of us I was deeply shaken by this unjust tragedy, and I wrote a song for Mahsa the next day called *Little Bird* ([click here](#) to listen).

Little bird with the broken wing, fly fly away.

Published initially on September 17, 2023.

Rolling with Radical Uncertainty

Suggested Song: [A Quiet Place](#), Garnett Mimms & The Enchanters

Suggested Drink: [The Unnecessary Noise cocktail](#). Bourbon, Aperol, Absinthe, Bitters, Vermouth.

“It’s not what you look at that matters, it’s what you see.”

- Henry David Thoreau

Prepare for a turbulent 2024, for we are entering a period of radical uncertainty along numerous angles: an ominous election and wannabe dictator; the promise and peril of AI off leash; weather extremes and rising tides; ruinous wars and unstable alliances; a tenuous economy and skittish market; the rosé grape harvest.

This maelstrom of continuous news and noise can distract and befuddle the most focused among us. How do we stay on course when the winds are howling? We find our true North Star.

If you’ve spent time in snow country you know that driving in a blizzard at night is daunting. A riot of flakes swirl up from the road and in from the sides. The white-out visibility and gusting winds are disorienting in the extreme. Staying on the road, much less in your lane, is an unnerving challenge. Where is my lane? In fact, where the hell is the road?

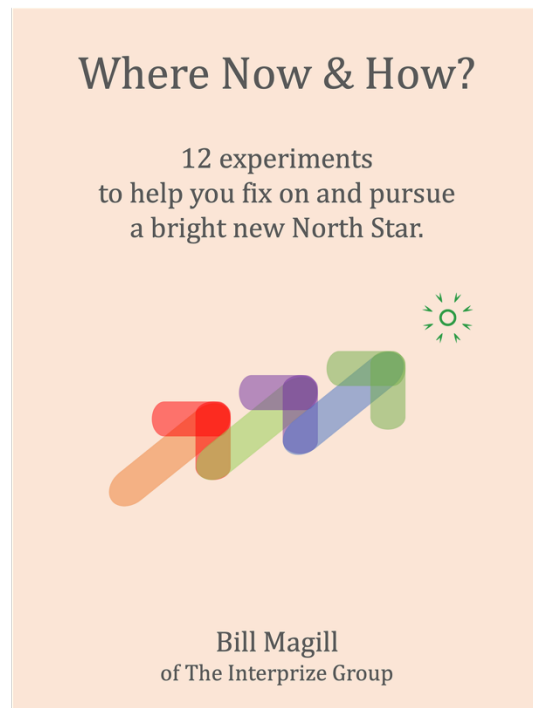
Hi beams are not the solution to low visibility in heavy snow or fog. They simply throw more light out onto the very thing obstructing our view. No, greater illumination of that wall of white doesn’t help, what helps is a guiding star, a beacon ahead that is revealing our destination and points to avoid. That’s why lighthouses were built.



I wrote about North Stars last March, in [Experiment #3](#) (*Your Mission Definition*) of my 2023 series on the art of defining and pursuing grand life ambitions. 2024 will be the tumultuous time for a bright

guiding star ahead. Focusing on an inspiring legacy project will be particularly helpful in a year of mega (MAGA?) uncertainty and dread. You may be unable to insulate from the swirling storm, but you can keep the beams low and focus on what really matters: what you have to offer, not what we all have to lose. Good luck.

Note that the series of 2023 *experiments* mentioned above are published in my Substack stream as well as the compilation “Where Now & How,” available for free download [here](#).



Published initially on January 17, 2024.

True Home

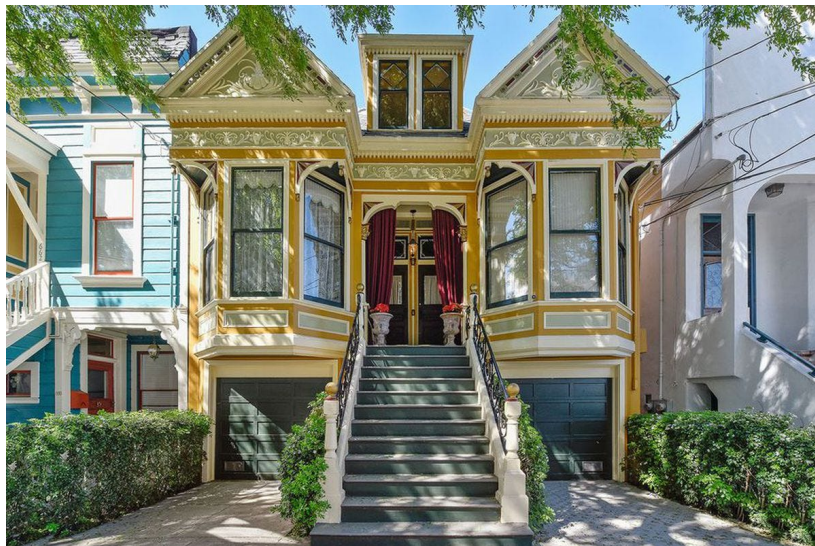
Suggested Song: [Country Home](#), Bill Magill

Suggested Drink: Beer Nektar Blonde Ale, [Sunset Reservoir Brewing Company](#) (from my SF neighborhood, the Sunset)

Where I live, that place I call home, plays a critical role in my algebra of happiness. When making plans for life after midlife we often concentrate on *what we do*, and less so on *where we live* (or even *whom we love*). Perhaps we regard both as immutable. *For this reason I can't leave here, (and for that reason I can't leave him)*. You can change these things, actually, if ownership over self is a priority. The better question is not *can I*, but *should I*.

I was in Singapore last week for work. It offers much to admire. The city is modern, clean, and safe. The street food tradition is celebrated, with delicious specialties from every corner of Asia, and cheap. The MRT public transport runs regularly and on time. Singapore is veiled in a warm and verdant environment, and not hard to imagine as a former rainforest. It is an immigrant enclave (as an American I love cultural diversity) and offers a variety of fascinating ethnic neighborhoods to explore.

So, I feel lucky to have work in Singapore on occasion. It's a great place to visit, but do I want to live there? Well, at the right age and for ridiculous pay I could have been tempted. But that's not now. And it would never be True Home.



Just another beautiful home in San Francisco.

One advantage of getting older: we have fewer obligations to force compromise. The early adult years are marked by a series of concessions to location for studies, work, and family (at both ends). I think we've all yielded to these priorities without complaint, to optimize the career trajectory and keep the

household happy. In my case that location was always San Francisco, so not much of a sacrifice and definitely no complaints.

At post career we are liberated from most such obligations. That doesn't mean we want to move – most of us love where we've landed – but it becomes an option. Options are good. I think it's a healthy exercise to remind ourselves of why we don't move, ... or perhaps plant a whispering seed to the contrary.

English friends of mine living in Provence repeat a family ritual each Christmas. They pose the question: do we want to stay in Aix for another year? The 3 of them – dad, mom, and daughter – each write their responses on small slips of paper and place them in a hat. For the past 10 years now the response has always been a unanimous YES. I love the ceremony that gives them each a vote, and an opportunity to reflect on how moving back to Bristol would impact their lives.



A morning in Aix-en-Provence, Barbara Jaskiewicz.

Writing this piece has prompted me to consider the same question (practice what you preach!). I moved to Aix-en-Provence in 2010 seeking my True post-50 Home. For these past 14 years it has overdelivered on that promise, filling me with creative inspiration, providing calm and restoration, offering a stage to meet fascinating new friends and lovers. Do I stay another year, or 2 years, or the rest of my days? It has always been an easy yes, but suddenly I'm not sure; an unexpected and baffling feeling. I've been a most enthusiastic cheerleader of this locale since arriving. But life is not static; friends leave, children grow up, and our fonts of happiness evolve in importance. And so I'm running the experiment.

What is the experiment, you ask?

The True Home Experiment

First, note that there is a kaleidoscope of factors we each consider when imagining that perfect place we call True Home. No two kaleidoscopes are the same and no single place on earth perfect to everyone. My list of top 10 criteria will likely differ from yours, and how they are weighted in importance will also be unique.

To run the experiment, grab a pencil and paper, then:

1. Create a table with 4 columns.
2. In the left column list the 10 most important criteria against which you evaluate your happiness in location. Things like proximity to family, near a surfable sea or skiable mountain, access to world-class museums, etc. It's your list.
3. In the next column, rate each of these criteria from 1 to 5; 5 being that it's indispensable in defining your perfect location and 1 meaning it's a consideration, but definitely not critical. Every criteria in your top 10 list should at a minimum be a consideration.
4. In the third column assign a rating to each criteria on how your current location is faring, again from 1 to 5.
5. Now, subtract the ratings in column 2 (level of importance) from column 3 (current location). Where the differences are 0 or positive you're doing well. Variances of negative 2 or more merit attention.

I'm including my most recent True Home experiment as an example. Mostly good, but one area of work: proximity to my kids. That's a big consideration. It has me thinking. Action may be needed.

Bill's True Home Attributes	Importance	Current	Difference
Desired geography (sea, mountains, or plains)	4	5	1
Desired setting (urban, suburban, or rural)	5	5	0
Desired climate (warm, cool, arid, wet or other)	3	5	2
Cultural vitality (museums, cinema, artist fairs)	4	4	0
Diversity (in all forms)	3	4	1
Novelty and challenge (language, ethnicity, customs)	3	5	2
Nightlife (restaurants, bars, concert halls)	3	4	1
Order and cleanliness (mostly free of crime, grit, and graft)	2	5	3
Proximity to family (parents, siblings and kids)	5	2	-3
Services & infrastructure (public transit, airport, fast internet)	4	4	0

What can you do about a location misalignment? Pick up and move to a more perfect location? Take a one-year sabbatical there? Arrange a periodic home exchange (there are numerous platforms that support these arrangements)? The reality may be that you can't do anything, at the moment. Still, there's great value in thinking through what that fix would require, and what you would gain and give up in pursuing it. Making plans now, even the smallest steps, can release a wave of those *I'm planting one foot forward on a new grand adventure* endorphins. I can tell you want an amazing, liberating feeling that is.

A humble acknowledgement

There are billions of people on this planet with no possibility of choosing where they live. Worse, many have been forced from their homes, never to return. What they would give to see that old familiar front door again. In Gaza, Israel, the Ukraine, Haiti, and way too many other flash points on the globe this is the rule, not the exception. I write this essay with great humility in the face of these injustices. Never take our extreme good fortunes for granted.

Published initially on April 7, 2024.

Beyond Marriage

Suggested Song: [Chapel of Love](#). Barry, Greenwich, Spector. (I love this Bette Midler version.)

Suggested Drink: [French Connection cocktail](#). Cognac (for a friendship's strength and depth) and Amaretto (for its warmth and affection).

“The secret to happiness, Billy Boy? Marry well.”

– Mike Sottak

I moved to Aix-en-Provence in 2010, after splitting from Alexandra and a 20-year marriage. We had 3 kids; I brought 1. We had a nest egg and a home; we divvied them up amiably. We spent 2 decades building something infinitely more valuable than a legal union; we honored it. In short, we still loved each other, but in a different universe of needs and partnering. And we still do.

Escaping to Provence would have been impossible without Alexandra's clearance and support. That escape was key to rediscovering myself at midlife; a period of growing tension around who I was and why I mattered. The happiness and welfare of our 3 little Magills was paramount, and we ran that priority through every move to which we agreed, married or not. It was all a bit unplanned, beautifully. Some years with their French mom in San Francisco, some years with the American dad in France, and often in different combinations. It was an unconventional upbringing that formed 3 tested, confident, and soulful young adults. Somehow, they still love us.

When I'm in San Francisco, I stay at the old home. When Alexandra is in Provence, she stays with me, along with her partner when traveling together. It saves each of us a lot of hassle and money; me in particular. SF is expensive. We spent a long weekend as a family unit last fall, just mom and dad and the 3 kids, while her partner volunteered to stay home with the ailing mother-in-law. The definition of selflessness and generosity.



Banksy

I need to start thinking about a will one of these days. If I'm still uncoupled, I may put the ex in executor. It's a reflection of the trust and confidence I have in her, that we share in each other. She's not much impressed by lavish displays of superfluous possessions, so any assets I don't burn through will flow to the kids anyhow. It's one less thing I need to worry about. She's solid. I married well.

If you win, then I lose. NFW!

Game Theory (noun): the analysis of a situation involving conflicting interests in terms of gains and losses among opposing players.

– Merriam-Webster Dictionary

I'm imagining the contractual framework of a Trumpian marriage. The Donald runs every relationship through a transactional prism, with no apparent awareness that the most rewarding transactions (financial, relational, or other) are win-win, not zero sum. This is not some pollyanna Bill Magill happiness babble (I have plenty of that if interested). This is basic business school 101 stuff, which explains much about his underwhelming record of returns (4,000 cash-burning lawsuits, 6 corporate bankruptcies, 2 equally cash-burning divorces, and 1 failed insurrection, with the incarceration of 378 "Trump Patriots"). But I digress.

Divorce need not be a blood sport, a zero-sum game. The win/lose maxim only pulls down the happiness average for both, and for the entire clan when kids are involved. It's a calculus of mutually assured disgruntlement. Life is challenging enough. Why lose your closest ally over self-destructive bragging rights? The vows may have ended, but the alliance can remain unbroken.

Trust and intimacy are fundamental to a healthy marriage. Trust and loyalty are the elements of a happy post-marriage alliance. For the ring-buying young and hopeful, the key question is not only, will this person be a loving, supportive spouse throughout our blissful years together? It is also, will this person be a loving, trusted ally (and possible co-parent) throughout the rest of our lives, spent together or not.

Published initially on April 8, 2024.

Impromptu

Suggested Song: [Impromptu #3](#), Franz Schubert. (Performed by an 84 year-old Vladimir Horowitz.)

Suggested Drink: Peroni Nastro Azzurro, a light Italian lager.

Impromptu: im·promp·tu / adjective

Made, done, or formed on or as if on the spur of the moment.

– Merriam Webster Dictionary

The weather was fowl but we set off nonetheless. Our weekend in Italy wouldn't be framed in the usual routine – eat, drink, swim, doze, and repeat through the day – but there were no doubts about fun and finding lots of it. We always do. As per custom, Ospedaletti was the destination, the Petit Royal our hotel, and Playa79 our favored bistro upon the beach. Or plans would change en route. The only plan was no committed plan, and that was also per custom. We may end up in Cannes or Genoa. Will this old gimpy Fiat even get us across the border? It was all very impromptu.

The weekend came together spontaneously, as the best often do. One of us in from the States for a bit of work, the other 2 changing plans last minute to accommodate the opening. A room at the Petit Royal? Yes, it was confirmed available, yet ambiguous in true Italian fashion. *No Signore*, no full name, credit card number, nor contact information required; the room for Party of Bill will be ready. If arriving after 8 pm (we would be) the desk will be closed (it was), but you can call this number (we did) and a desk clerk will show up (jolly and drunk). Beautifully impromptu.



The charming (and cheap) Petit Royal in yellow.

The village of Ospedaletti was 2 steps below its usual sleepy pace. It was the final ski weekend in the Italian Alps and the grey drizzle along the sea sealed the choice for many. By 9 pm most trattorias in town were lowering the curtains, but we did manage a late table at a quiet family bistro. Stunning in all respects: the food, the wine, the prices, and our charming *cameriera*, who informed us, apologetically,

that we wouldn't find any places open for after-dinner drinks in town that evening. With a dramatic pull of her index finger across the throat, she emphasized the fact: *Ospedaletti è morto*. Could we order a bottle to go? *Naturalmente*. And she volunteered 3 glasses from behind the bar, plus corkscrew. All were placed on loan in a travel bag, with an additional bottle as backup, and off we went. Impromptu.

The next morning was cloudy but dry. We took that as a win. The day would be spent in time-honored Mediterranean fashion: beachside table, ice bucket on autofill, revolving plates of fresh things from the sea, and endless chat about fascinating things of no real significance. Except one thing: a manuscript lifted from a beach bag, with reading proffered.



The mixed seafood plate at Playa79.

We are all creatives in this group; one of us famously, the other 2 aspiringly. We share our prototypes, listening to this song or hearing that chapter or getting a look at a painting in work. Opinions are given with kindness but honesty. Changes are made or not. It's a process of mutual critique based on years of friendship and trust.

"Only write the book you can't avoid writing. There are plenty of books already."
– Salman Rushdie (to his students at Emory College)

The surprise draft was a mesmerizing read. The easy cadence paired with the cycle of waves lapping gently at the sand, just 30 feet or so away. Add in the sea air and sparkling prosecco, and an intoxicating gestalt of late morning Mediterranean indulgence floated over the table, blissfully. *Signora*, another plate of fritto misto *per favore*. No, he won't avoid writing this novel, our prosaist most impromptu.



The fritto misto plate at Playa79.

And the weekend continued on much in that fashion. Sun, then sudden downpours, and sharing umbrellas with local teenagers. Dodging the rain with impromptu piccolo beers here and nibbles there. Varying states of hedonistic consciousness: epicurean; bacchanalian; Mediterranean. And a final impulsive decision to pack up early to share a final meal in Nice's Old Town.

The moral of this story? I'm wrestling with that. (Opinions welcome.) Perhaps, it's my belief in the value of embracing impulsiveness and spontaneity in life. In the pursuit of greater creativity, inquisitiveness, and discovery, reacting to events as they unfold in unpredictable ways can push us beyond comfort zones, and that's a healthy thing. Of course, when embarking on unplanned adventures, in 3rd languages, with gimpy cars, to sleepy seaside villages, traveling with trusted company equally adept at the unexpected and impromptu is essential.

So what great adventures are you un-planning?

Published initially on April 26, 2024.

Feeling Fab

Suggested Song: [Two of Us](#), The Beatles

Suggested Drink: [Baltic Pilsner](#), from Liverpool's Black Lodge Brewery

I was in Liverpool last week, where I spent a few days at Soundhouse studio recording final tracks for my latest masterpiece. Staying at the prestigious Ibis downtown (ahem), I traced the footsteps of the young Fab Four, down Dale Street to the docks, up serpentine alleys to timeless pubs, past the Cavern Club and over to Penny Lane, always in a grey drizzle. *Two of us wearing raincoats*. I prayed for divine intervention and welcomed all inspiration from the same streets that surely lit the creative flame of my favorite band and its artistic genius.



Recording an album is expensive. There are musicians, recording engineers, and a producer to pay; studio time to rent; guitars, keyboards, and software to buy; and travel to book. Some in my creative circle play for free or at a discount, and I so deeply appreciate that. But most are professionals and business is business, ... despite their great love for Bill Magill and his music. *Loved working with you again my friend, here's my invoice.*

Creating great art can be an exhausting series of frustrations and exhilarations. Writing, painting, composing, or whatever the oeuvre; one's obsession with getting it right is both time consuming and draining. And for it to be great, you must be obsessed. With music there are melodies to compose, lyrics to write, an orchestra of instruments to arrange and their scores to draft, tempos and time signatures and dynamics to consider, and negotiations on all of it with those supporting the project. I'm blessed to have a key collaborator in David Dower, a brilliant keyboardist and classically trained musician who challenges my choices and keeps me on track. He also transforms my journeyman piano parts into sublime works of virtuosity.

So this project was an ambitious endeavor. It took 2 years to complete, ... and that's just the first 5 songs. (The B side is scheduled for later this year.) I may work slowly and get distracted, but I never stop working. To reach this point sacrifices were required, travel delayed, invitations declined, pennies pinched. If you commit to unreasonably audacious ambitions (and you should) this may sound familiar. I sold my much-loved 2007 Land Rover to support the budget, particularly for the final push in Liverpool. Damn, I loved that car.



In the control room at Soundhouse.

Is all this the price of fame? Probably fewer than 1,000 people will give this release a listen, for now, and perhaps just a tenth of that. So why do it? This is the question.

Why do it?

Writing music is something I cannot not do. When my antennas are up the melodies invade, usually when I'm unusually happy or sad, hurt or in love. Some are banal bits of flotsam that get quickly discarded. Others are curious flirtations that get hummed into *Music Memos* for a relisten down the road. And a few are real gems. At least I think there's enough diamond in that rough to sit at the piano or with my guitar and start tinkering in the moment.

I feel an obligation to get the gems heard. It's as if the gods of song have selected me to be their channel of diffusion. That these creations didn't come as much from me as through me. I've heard other songwriters express the same sentiment, talents far beyond my own including McCartney, Dylan, and Cohen. My bet is that artists of all types experience this creative possession. An inspired flourish of paint and the canvas comes alive; the mad push through a new chapter and an unexpected story angle suddenly emerges. It can be spooky, as in *where the hell did that come from?* It is also quite wondrous, this sense of helpless possession powered by things curiously mystical and otherworldly.

And now you

The obsessed are not all artists (thank god). Noah built a boat. Jobs reimagined personal electronics. I suspect that both experienced many a *moment of doubt and pain* (more lyrics from a little-known British band). I suspect as well that Jobs' obsessive pursuit of the elegant-form-meets-function vanishing point

was something he could not not do, profitability be damned. Noah, on the other hand, had little choice (or so I've read).

Is there a mad quest or grand ambition that you feel compelled to pursue, that you cannot not do? In younger years we have endless excuses to defer: other financial priorities like kids and home; other time commitments like family and work. One beauty of aging is the gradual easing of obligations to other priorities and clearance to focus on our own. I've talked about the merits of legacy-defining ambitions often in earlier *postcards*. Perhaps now is the time to write your own legacy. Not one that will be audited for profitability or even popularity, but simply the purest expression of beautiful you.

Published initially on June 5, 2024.

Take a Good Sniff!

Suggested Song: [Smells Like Teen Spirit](#), Nirvana.

Suggested Drink: [Sea Breeze cocktail](#): vodka, cranberry juice, grapefruit juice.

“Smells are the fallen angels of the senses.”

Helen Keller

Then

US 50 runs the width of America, from Sacramento to Ocean City, Maryland. Every July my family would join this historic highway near Annapolis to make our summer sojourn to the sea. The towering Chesapeake Bay Bridge was a prominent midway point, and from there we'd pass south through Maryland's Eastern Shore to Cambridge, and then due east. “One hour to Ocean City” my mom would say, and we'd all light up with the tingle of holiday anticipation.



What I remember most about these drives are the smells, in particular the briny aroma of the Atlantic Ocean that would tease us over those final 30 miles into OC. Our provenance was Central Pennsylvania farm country, with a July bouquet of shucked corn, cow manure, and farm machinery. I was a lucky child to have this upbringing, but eager to leave it behind for a week of waves and boardwalk adventure. On the long approach to OC we'd start passing a stream billboards advertising beachside hotels and restaurants (*Philips Crab House: the Best Jimmies in OC!*), the sky would assume a blue shimmering haze, and then the first waves of salty air would work through the vents of my dad's 1960s blue Buick wagon. All thoughts of home, gone.

Now

My days in Provence are also marked by a broad palette of smells, particularly rich through the summer months. The August stalls at the daily markets are full of ripe local peaches, apricots, and plums. It was strawberries in June and mountains of cherries in July. The figs and Cavaillon cantaloupes are so full of sugar now their skins crack and honeybees hover. Bunches of bright green mint sit among the fresh coriander and parsley at every stall, and lavender, harvested last month, is arranged in bouquets wrapped in twine or offered in small cloth sacks perfect for winter closets or dresser drawers. It can be sensorially overpowering.



Cavaillon melons at the local market.

This rich symphony of perfumes will fade in the fall, yielding to the more subtle scents of Mediterranean herbs – thyme, rosemary, bay leaves – and gourds halved or quartered for your Sunday soup. But it will be a fade, not a fold. I swear the blind can navigate Provence, at least the markets, on scent alone year around.

If I leave Provence someday it's the smells that will most linger in memory. I don't take them for granted, but I also don't grant them enough significance in my calculus of happiness and place. The sight of lavender fields in June; the sound of cigale hordes (cicadas) in the hot summer countryside; the tang of local olives and chilled rosé at apéro hour, and the laughter of friends sharing said apéro; these things are unique to Provence and core to its charm. But it's the fragrance of life here that I find most enchanting.

You

Are there scents that bring back your favorite memories? Are there smells uniquely symbolic to the region in which you live now? I ask you not to take these for granted. You may want to seek them out for a quick trip down memory lane. My dad (of the big blue Buick) lost his sense of smell around retirement age. He was not one to complain, but the enjoyment of my mom's delicious casseroles was

forever dimmed, as was his savoring of a ripe, juicy tomato picked from the family vine in July and sampled between the rows. *Wow, that is a tomato!* Now, go out and have a good sniff!

Published initially on August 9, 2024.

Acknowledgements

These essays would not be possible without the inspiration and embrace by the city of Aix-en-Provence and its many colorful inhabitants. You've given this runaway a warm welcome and soft landing. Also, to my 3 children – Jess, Stella, and Shane – who followed Dad across oceans and continents, suffered my Quixotic wanderings, and forewent many little luxuries with great patience and good humor. To their mother (my ex) Alexandra, you are the truest reflection of selfless love and still my closest ally.

The period of this third volume of essays (2017-2024) was colored beautifully by friends new and old, with whom I shared many rosé-colored afternoons and weekends. There were also moments of delirious love tumbling and painful heartbreak, touched on in a few pieces. Through it all, the richly-decadent moveable feast, to which Provence excels, remained in good form. Many friends have returned to homes in the US, Australia, the UK, and Europe, but remain forever family to me now. Thank you for persistently guiding me astray.

Biographical Note



Bill Magill was born in the small town of Newport, Pennsylvania. Studies, work, and whims carried him to Texas and then California. Disillusioned with the Silicon Valley fixation on wealth and competitive consumerism, Bill moved to Provence in 2010 to seek a simpler, deeper, more authentic life. Writing became part daily structure, part self-therapy, and laid the foundation for this collection of essays on bewilderment at midlife and the search for *what truly matters*.

These ramblings are meant to inspire and provoke fellow travelers and big dreamers also unsettled with life – what we do, where we live, and whom we love – and rally the pursuit of grand ambitions of deep personal meaning, simple as that. Please share these *Postcards from a Runaway* with friends and family who never stop asking the right questions.

Bill has worked in venture capital, investment banking, consulting, and academia (he still gives courses on startup creation at INSEAD and elsewhere). Bill has also been paid to wash dishes, tend bar, pump gas, play loud music, and blow up cool stuff with big lasers. All readers passing through Provence are invited to seek Bill out for a drink and exchange of ideas.