

Stay in the Moment



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You must have a room, or a certain hour or so a day, where you don't know what was in the newspapers that morning, you don't know who your friends are, you don't know what you owe anybody, you don't know what anybody owes to you. This is a place where you can simply experience and bring forth what you are and what you might be. This is the place of creative incubation. At first you may find that nothing happens there. But if you have a sacred place and use it, something eventually will happen.

—Joseph Campbell

Writing is a form of making, and making humanizes the world.

—Richard Rhodes

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Slipping Away

Emily

I sat in the grass outside Lemon Avenue Elementary School. It was a hot day and the sun beat down into my skin - a feeling I usually enjoyed, but in this moment made me feel irritated as my pale skin began to radiate more heat than felt comfortable. Most of my classmates had been picked up. Some of their moms lingered to make sure someone was coming for me, but I reassured them my grandma was just running late. In a time before cell phones and too young to be interested in wearing a watch, I judged the time by how many kids were left in the grass. Slowly the ones who always lingered till the end with me got picked up and left. A sensitive kid, my eyes welled with tears as I walked into the front office. This was the third time that week that my grandma had forgotten me at school.

Early in her diagnosis she took post-it notes and labeled everything in her apartment - TV, microwave, toothbrush. She labeled pictures of my sister and I, already spelling my sister's name wrong. I guess she thought that was how she'd hang on, but what none of us knew then was that that's not how the brain degenerates. It would be to no avail to know what a microwave is called when you no longer knew how to work it or what might go inside. Labeling Leah and I wouldn't keep the real living existing versions of us bouncing in and out of her house every day in the forefront of her mind.

"Is tomorrow Sunday?" she'd ask over and over again. On Sundays her old lady friends picked her up and they went to church. She clung frantically onto Sundays, the last ingrained piece of repetitive structure her brain retained. Then the old ladies stopped coming. Maybe it was too scary for them. Maybe they missed their friend. Perhaps they worried for their own ailing minds. Diligently my mom made a new routine around Sundays. We went to church and then the Chinese Buffet. At the time, my mom was somehow pulling off being a full-time mom and working full time—a nurse trying to squeeze in three twelves, parent her two kids, lead girl scout troops, volunteer in the classroom and care for her aging mom.

"Is tomorrow Sunday?"

"Not yet Granny."

We convinced Granny to take us out to eat or to buy us special occasion foods far too often, far more often than special occasions - perhaps that's why we were chubby children. We'd walked to Denny's. I was almost a decade too young to drive and her license had been gone for a while. We ordered pancakes and ice cream Sundaes with extra toppings and laughed and played till our bellies hurt. Granny was fully engaged with us, tickling Leah, sharing our ice cream and humoring us in playing the arcade games in hopes of winning lip gloss or a stuffed animal. Then the check came. At junctures like this, usually she still knew what to do, but this time I guess the neuron didn't fire. Unfazed, I dug into her purse looking for her wallet. I knew her PIN and which card to use, as I was used to these skills slowly slipping away. But her card wasn't there. With some luck I found enough spare change and one-dollar bills to cover the bill but not enough for the tip. I became hot, my cheeks red. What were we gonna do? I began to resent my sister sitting happily across the

table grinning as she shoved more pancakes in her chubby cheeks. Embarrassed, I tried to explain to the waiter that I was very sorry and that my mom would be back in a few days with more money for a tip and then I hurriedly ushered us out.

She listened to us like no one else did. If I got a good grade on a project or an award at school or had a funny story to tell, I'd tell her over and over again as any excited kid might. She'd react each time with zeal and excitement like she'd never heard it before. We picked up on this eventually and intentionally retold our stories so that we could soak in the excitement and praise of a loving adult over and over again until we were totally filled up.

Eventually she did know who the hell we were. Some days she knew she loved us, knew we were her people. Other days she just took our word for it. We'd sit outside on the patio at her assisted living home and have a picnic, enjoy each other's company in the sun. Eventually she stopped asking about Sundays. Lots of people in the home never got visitors, forgotten by their families as they forgot who they were. We'd chat with them too—sometimes going along with whoever they thought we were in whatever chapter of their lives they thought we existed in, a daughter, a granddaughter, a sister. One man, Augie, came to our picnics. My grandma didn't seem to mind sharing us.

I didn't know how it would get her in the very end. I guess you just forget how to eat or breathe and then you're gone. If only the post-it notes would have contained instructions for life's most vital tasks.

First Day of School

Katie Glowacki

It was a plaintive request. “Don’t leave” with a furtive response: “We won’t.” But, of course, that was a lie. I am six. It is my first day of school. It is a different school than Tioga Elementary in Bensenville, Ill. It is a state away. A lifetime away. We are all visiting, and I am hoping that we will all stay. But there are not enough beds for everyone. Ten beds are needed for me and my siblings, and a small bed for my mother. She doesn’t need a big bed anymore.

My new school is Sacred Heart Cathedral Elementary School and has red bricks that are cold in November, but radiating heat in early September, like the radiators lined up under all of the windows that will be hissing in the winter. The building is three stories high, ceilings 20 feet from the floor, transom windows on all of the doors, left open with the optimistic hope of a breeze to move the stagnant hot air of sweaty little bodies in blue checkered woolen uniforms and black and white saddle shoes, crowded together in what the adults hope would be a line.

I was set down on the sea of black top, the playground, by my 63-year-old grandmother. This woman, who gave birth to my mother 39 years ago, appeared to have lost whatever warmth she ever had before I walked with her to this immense building. She would be staying, as one of the tamers of the children, her 38 third graders would be lined up next to me. I would be lined up in this split grade, with 6, 7, and an occasional 8-year-old who either loved the teacher tremendously or could not master the mechanics of second grade reading or math. All the first graders are new to this school. Sacred Heart does not have a Kindergarten.

The nun who is my teacher, stands 7 feet tall. Her face is barely visible through the veil consisting of a white bill, and the contrasting black portion that surely covered her bald head. You cannot see her limbs, and maybe she doesn’t have any. There is no discernable movement under the historic garment that enshrouds from the shoulder to feet, any hint of a female shape. Her eyes are colorless, her nose long enough to extend out beyond the boundaries of her wimple. At that time, I doubted that she had teeth, they weren’t shown, no sign of a smile available to the little animals, her students, almost evenly matched male to female, but with a few more boys. This was not a dress rehearsal. There was no warmup. I was placed just after Jane Gerwe, too tall and too confident, who would never be my friend, and before Kevin Knickrum, whose hair was the color of a freshly baked sweet potato. He was in front of Pricilla Laird, and I assumed it was because her hair was the same brilliant orange-red, as I certainly didn’t understand the concept of lining up alphabetically.

We are introduced to the classroom after climbing 28 marble steps, trod on by thousands of other would-be scholars, over decades, including my mother at my age, each exacting a small portion of the gain, and polishing what is no longer level, into an icy sheen.

None dare attempt to sit in one of the military straight, and conjoined rows of wooden and metal desks, without permission of the avatar known as Sister Mary Saint Johanna. Barely breathing, I took my place when the 13-inch index finger pointed to what would be my solitary wooden slat. I don’t remember the rest of the

day. There was lunch, it was food, I may have eaten it. There was the playground after lunch, but I didn't know anyone, and my brothers who were my constant play mates in my former life were across the universe on the boy's playground. Mercifully, the day ended, and my grandmother, known to everyone as Mrs. Margaret McGinn, gathered me up to return to her home, my new home, to my new bed, to live with siblings fewer by 6, and parents fewer by 2. They were gone. Daddy had died 11 months ago. And let me name them, the rest who left me, while I negotiated the first day of first grade by myself. Mommy, Mike, Mary Jane, Jo Beth, Therese, Tony, and the 12-month-old baby, Margaret. I remained with Vicki, who potty trained me 3 and a half years ago, and my brothers, Matt, 14 months older than Steve, and Steve, who is 14 months older than me, collectively known as the triplets in slow motion.

Eleven year old Mary Jane had said they wouldn't leave. She didn't want to see me cry before my first day of first grade, in this new city on the Mississippi River, a million miles away from Bensenville.

True Healers

Marisa Gallant Stahl, MD MSCS

I walked into the room to meet Ferdinand, a pre-adolescent boy with hepatopulmonary syndrome. As a first-year fellow, I was excited – I hadn't seen one of those yet. I quickly surveyed the room. He was surrounded by his family- father, mother, brother, and sister. I took one quick look at his yellow skin, thin straggly translucent arms, and ocean blue lips. It didn't take a medical degree to know that there was something wrong. He tried to stand up out of his chair on his stick-like legs to shake my hand and quickly became very short of breath. I didn't need numbers or laboratory values to tell me his liver was failing and he was going to die without a new one.

His family knew his liver was failing, they could no longer keep him at home gasping for life with every small, tenuous movement. He needed more oxygen than they could give him at home. They knew the hospital could keep him alive, but the last place they wanted to bring him was our hospital. They did not trust doctors. They did not trust science or medicine- there surely was a solution other than liver transplant. We medicated to poison. We were not true healers. They trusted their church, which taught them that every medication, every vaccine, every intervention that we gave their son was poison to his very soul and being. Yet we were the only ones that could give him the oxygen that kept him comfortable; what a predicament they were in.

I wondered what he thought when they weren't around. If he really thought that the medications we gave him that made him feel better were poison to his soul. Did he want a new liver? Did he want to live? One night when his family snuck away after yelling at the staff about poisoning his dinner with gluten, I snuck in to get to know my patient better. Now, the barriers to his care seemed far more intriguing than the novelty of his diagnosis. He was wearing a mask that actively blew oxygen into his deprived body. He looked better- his lips were now a shade of rouge and he was no longer panting for precious air. He told me he felt better; no longer struggling to speak. He said his deepest wish was to be able to run and play basketball with his brother again. He wanted a new liver; he wanted to live.

Our evil medical team worked with our even more evil legal team to move medical decision making to someone who would actually protect Ferdinand's wishes. After months of partnering with child protective services, we did it; we got the call and replaced his failing fibrotic liver with a new healthy one. We saw his amazing recovery; his once swollen belly flattening, his arms and legs getting back their necessary fat cushion, his breath becoming easy and effortless without being strapped down with an oxygen mask. He finally played basketball in the hospital teen center, but would never be able to play with his brother again.

Stay in the Moment

K. Riemersma

Gravity of heart and mind isn't very sunny.
It's smooth and heavy, a mysterious stone
you lugged home from the river.

It's news that your sister has two DUIs, an arrest warrant, and slept in her car
during the worst blizzard Washington state has seen in five years.

Gravity of heart and mind is love and pain
fitted together tightly,
like the joints of a cabin built by Mennonites,
like fingers clasped together in worry
or prayer.

If the one who prays is an atheist
there is no celestial lift from the act.
There is only today.

Hope comes from
watching the moon reflect on the snow,
a roar of laughter in your AA meeting,
leaning against the sun warmed brick wall in the alley.

Gravity of Heart and Mind Isn't Very Sunny

Sloane

Gravity beckons me to the mountains. Gravity pulls us down the snow. Gravity breaks my ankle. Gravity pulls me on my back in a rescue toboggan. Gravity drives me in the truck bed and drops me at the hospital. Gravity pushes me to the floor. Gravity leans my crutches on the wall and then slides and slams them down. Gravity screws 6 titanium screws and a plate into my ankle; gravity makes that ankle heavy. Gravity sits me deep between my couch cushions and brings in dark gray clouds.

Little sunshine spots try to squeeze through all the Gravity. Sunny family and sunny friends come over to take sunny care of me and Gravity clouds my vision. Their sunny faces making me sunny-side-up eggs and helping me into the sunny claw-foot tub shine brightly; Gravity shields my eyes. Gravity rains on my sunny pals bringing sunny green curry tofu to my beautiful sunny home in their sunny flowery dresses walking on their two sunny feet. Gravity pushes away the sunny puppy licking my face with his sunny tongue. Sunny bachelor episodes, sunny book recommendations, sunny packages with puzzles and candles, sunny breaks from yelling patients and sunny games of sunny scrabble, are hidden by Gravity clouds. !

Usually used to keeps my mouth corners up, my feet running, my hiking boots hiking, my skis sliding, my car driving, my laughter flowing, my snow-shoes trekking, and my hands cooking. Gravity is far too busy keeping my ankle from touching the ground.

Love Poem to a Pigeon

Carrie Knowlton

Forever practical, I took your melancholy
and gave it a stern talking to
Buried in a lockbox, deep
Like a time capsule for happiness to find when she wants to
wane nostalgic
but I gulped down the key
as if it was my secret to keep

Maybe I should have taken it and wrapped it like a miniature
mummified cat
that you can put in your pyramid as a reminder that
even pharaohs have
bad days

Or burned it
not to ashes
but like something that you get
at a fancy restaurant
soaked in brandy and
set on fire
leaving behind only
sweetness
and caramel
and a better appreciation
for Art.

Played it like a saxophone,
Balancing out slow low notes
with too many, too high, too fast
until you couldn't tell how sad it was
unless you really
got
Jazz.

I could have trimmed it
like a bonsai tree.
Trained it to sing,
like a canary.

Fed it ice cream
made it purr
let it sit on my lap

once in a while.

I should have drunk whiskey with it.
Everyone knows it loves company.

I wish I had dragged it out of bed,
to the top of a mountain.
Thrown it off.
Like a boomerang or
a pigeon
with this love poem
tied to her leg.

When I said you were the crazy one
I know I was exaggerating
not the depth of your darkness
but the breadth
of the crack
between us
and the insignificance
of pigeons.

Meditation on a Fulani Lock

Carrie Knowlton

Three pieces of thick, rough-hewn wood, carved under a mango tree in southeastern Senegal 20 years ago by Thierno Malick Diallo. A name never to be forgotten, written with pride by a carpenter born in Labe, Guinea. Never to be forgotten because it was written with a Bic purchased at a village boutique, for 10 CFA, along with a clear plastic bag of peanut oil filled from a giant steel drum, a cube of Maggi, and a piece of old French newspaper rolled into a cone to hold Chinese Gunpowder tea to be boiled on a charcoal stove with sugar in an enamel teapot, overflowing to sizzle and turn to sweet, smoky caramel on the coals and then poured elegantly from high above in three distinct servings.

First the premier, dark, strong and foamy, flecked with bitter leaves. The thicker the foam, the more talented the host, the more coveted a spot under his tree and the heartier the obligatory slurps from his guests. Then the deuxième, lighter and fiery hot yet somehow soothing under the shade of the mango tree. Finally, the troisième, sweetest and most delicate, flavored with fresh mint pulled from between rows of sorghum. Each elaborately poured from the kettle and then back and forth from one tiny glass to another, to cool and create a dense froth before being served on a platter by whichever child is lucky (or unfortunate) enough to have been assigned this honorable chore.

Thierno sat in long curls of wood shavings, hacking and sanding and smoothing the details of his creations – all functional. Axe handles and repaired pulleys for the well, and this.

“What is it?” I asked, as I picked my premier glass from the rusty platter presented by his seven year-old son, Amadou. I grimaced a little at the first slurp - thick and bitter, an acquired taste.

“You don’t know?” he laughed, flicking away the shavings towards the goats, who tasted each piece and dutifully chewed before discarding for the next. He turned the heavy wood over in his calloused hands to show me. “What do you think it is?” he asked. I felt the weight of it and turned it in my hands, noting how obvious it must be to him that I had never done the kind of work he had.

“Nakalawal,” he said. A word I didn’t know, although I had studied his language for more than a year. He took it back from me.

“What is that?” I asked again. He laughed again as he took his deuxième, scraping the bottom along the edge of the platter to remove any drops of tea that might have spilled in the long pour. I took mine in the same way, and Amadou poured water on the platter to remove any syrupy residue and flicked it off towards the goats, who scattered to find some more edible scraps.

Thierno turned his attention to the stove, shaking it to keep the coals hot, pouring fresh water on the twice-boiled leaves and returning the pot to boil. He then measured a glass full of sugar - filling to the brim and then just a little more – careful to create an impressive mound but not to waste any grains of the expensive treat. He poured that in, and as it almost melted into the tea leaves Amadou returned on cue from the sorghum field with a fistful of mint, which also went into the pot. Thierno returned to his work.

I gave up on trying to find out what a Nakalawal was and as the troisieme finished cooking we chatted about family, and the weather, and the rainy season, and how he came from Guinea to Senegal to settle this Fulani village 20 years before, with others escaping persecution after the upheaval of independence. We talked about whether my mother was upset that I went to Africa instead of getting married (she wasn't) and whether he had ever seen the ocean (he hadn't). I thanked him for the troisieme and walked home as donkeys brayed, hornbills swooped across my path, women started pounding millet for the evening meal and I reflected on how easy it was, in Senegal, to just strike up a conversation with a stranger who invites you to tea for no other reason than you are walking by and he needs someone to drink tea with while he works.

The next day, Amadou arrived at my door and presented me with a gift. Three pieces of wood, fashioned into a cross shape, carved in such a way that they fit together perfectly. "Nakalawal," he said, and then inserted a piece of twisted metal into the place where one inserted into the other and I realized that a nakalawal was a lock. Amadou was delighted at my surprise, giggled, and hurried home. I followed after him to thank his father, who showed me where he had written his name with the bic. "Tell everyone in America that I made this," he said. "People are buying French locks and forgetting about nakalawal, but I still remember."

Years later, I was at the British museum in London, in the basement where they keep the African artifacts. I saw squatting stools and mortar and pestles for pounding millet, familiar from my time in Senegal, treated as artifacts from another era instead of necessary and essential parts of life for people who still live without so much that we take for granted. Then, I saw a wall of intricately carved pieces of wood, fit together in cross shapes, carved with faces and animal heads and geometric patterns. More elaborate than my nakalawal but still easily recognizable. The placard read "African locks, 18th century, artist unknown." And I thought of Thierno Malick Diallo, who still knew.