

Among Others

Short Stories

by Richard Cavalier

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NOTE to readers: Several stories from the book are offered in full below, so that you can get an idea of the range and depth of offerings of the book as a whole.

About the Book:

These are stories of rebellion. . .envisioned, attempted or foregone. . .not in juvenile fashion, that family and friends will surely notice, but private and hurtful, as life delivers its cruelest blows.

In many different places in the world and in many different cultures, this author has found himself *Among Others* while fascinated with the various strictures and values imposed by the various cultures on the natural person. These Others might not represent the norm in prescribed ways, but they are among the norm in their human spirit and in their rebellious attempts—however futile—to cause the world to bend (even a bit) to their own wants and needs.

Three stories, as entered in the Contents page above, will appear below.

About the Author:

Richard Cavalier has traveled in more than forty countries around the world and has not ceased to be captivated by the surprising variations on humanity. The best survival mechanisms in all places and for all occasions, in his opinion, are love and humor.

He has attempted to pay back the world for his fine times by creating these stories and also by developing an ESL book (*Practical Word Power*) that permits non-teacher volunteers to tutor the foreign-born; it allows the language handicapped to sidestep their own vowel structure, adopt ours, and learn to pronounce every word *in* the dictionary—*from* the dictionary, not from generic word lists. That's independence that the school systems fail to teach!

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END

Contents:

Arrivederci, Roma

Shoes

The Besting

Delta

Prelude to an Easter

The Love Affair of the Century

The Nimble

Jeni

To be a Man

A Stop Along the Way

A Matter of Convenience

A Parable for Moderns

The Lesson

Buckingham's Duchess

Bolero

At Thebes

Pickup and Exit Lines

Autumn in New York

Last Summer in Paris

Settling the Meaning of Life

SHOES

His name was Nelson. That's unusual for a Hispanic, I suppose, but not uncommon in Central America, where he lived. But, then, he was an unusual boy. Or man. He was one of those so-homely-they're-handsome types at the age of about fourteen-going-on-forty. And he was funny, in a ragamuffin sort of way.

Anyhow, he was outside the high masonry fence of my hotel in Ambato when I was on my way to see the town and the famous outdoor market in the Valley of the Volcanos. I'd arrived only the day before, and I was eager to set out. Equador was smashingly green and freshly-pressed without being pristine or sterile.

"Shoeshine, Mister?" he called in his accent.

"Not now," I said. "I'm late."

"When you come back?"

"Late. I don't know."

"When I can shine your shoes?"

I said, "I don't know."

"Okay. I shine tomorrow."

"Okay. Tomorrow." I gave it no more thought and went off to see the place. If he wanted to come back tomorrow, fine. But no loss, either way. Tours are not about having shoe shines.

To make a long story short, Nelson was still outside the gate when I went out the next morning. I say *still* because he had apparently slept outdoors nearby in order not to miss me. After some later conversations with other hotel guests, I determined that the cash paid for a shoe shine was not an easy sum to come by on the local economy. A "monied" tourist, I was a *find* for nearly anyone. Especially this kid.

"Where you go, Mister?" he asked me after a stretched pause.

"I'm going to the bus so I can go to the Valley of the Volcanos," I said without expecting too much interest.

"I live," he said. "I show you."

"I can get a guide there, I'm sure," I answered, but he was not in the least dissuaded.

"I guide. No people better."

"You're too young to be a guide."

"Not guide how is old. Guide how is good. I good."

"Do you want to be my guide?"

"Sure, Mister."

"Then we have to hurry. The bus leaves soon."

"Okay. We go." He wheeled and started off. I followed. I had been commandeered, it seemed, and I might as well enjoy it. Regardless of the age of guides, the sights are the same.

We clambered onto a very democratic bus—one that took anybody and let them out absolutely anywhere along the road with any kind of load from chickens to children and much further along the alphabet. We jounced along in the countryside without conversing much. What should adults say to children in broken language? It was warm, dusty, sunny, and uncomfortable. And this was only mid-morning. A hot day for touring was ahead. So we rode for—I don't know how long—before I checked my watch several times.

There was pollen in the spring air and flies in the bus and camaraderie among the townspeople, who all knew each other—or at least knew someone who knew someone whom the

speaker didn't know. While gossip was not the final purpose of the ride (I assumed without being sure—it was an entertainment, after all) no one eschewed gossip. Meanwhile, tree branches whipped the bus as if to punish it for disturbing the sleeping air, and I had to roust myself from time to time to avoid napping. In all, we traveled more than an hour.

"Here. Get off," said Nelson.

I had no idea of where we were, but if I was going to be guided by a resident, there was no sense in balking.

"Una guia, Sen~or?" called a half dozen adult men desultorily as soon as we alighted. Don't let the grass grow, et cetera.

"Chico es mi guia," I said in my best Spanish, which seemed to be adequate, because there was an instant murmur among them. Nelson shone. Suddenly he was a man among men because wasn't he the Chosen Guide of a Tourist? "

We go. This way," he said, strutting off. It seemed to be heady stuff, and he was enjoying every swallow of the draught. Of course I followed. Finally I caught up with him despite his overly-brisk pace, and soon we were in the midst of the outdoor market. For the Indians of the hillside, this was the place to be, and many of them had walked five miles or more with wares on their heads. The women wore blouses and voluminous skirts, and the men wore dark pants and whatever main shirt they owned. People virtually lived here, surrounded by food, clothing, free entertainment, and companions of either sex. This was Buy City, Equador and surely worth the trip!

In sum, it was a kaleidoscope, although that easy description doesn't really suffice. Color raged for attention against the seductive glint of metals and glass; and shards of intricate native woven designs peeped surreptitiously between the salvos of optical warfare. We weren't there very long before I realized two things: first, I really didn't want to look at absolutely every booth except as a thing of color in montage; and second, Nelson and I should be getting hungry. It was way past noon.

"Where do we eat?" I asked.

"Here." He pointed to several locations.

"No restaurants?"

"No restaurant."

So we went to one of the carne stalls and ordered choritzos, or grilled meats, after we had bought fruit and bread. Wine was out of the question for so young a kid; so we had iced something that was not quite tea but was viscously sweet to compensate. We had a picnic and laughs about simple things that don't require precise language. Not much in life does, beyond medicine and science.

"If you could have anything you wanted at this fair," I said as lightly as I could manage, "what would you want?"

"Shoes," he said without missing a beat. He held up both of his feet, and his shoes really were a mess. I hadn't noted the rundown heels and the holes in the sides of the soles. Who knows what they looked like on the soles?

"Are shoes expensive?"

"Mucho." He was grave.

"How much?"

He mentioned a figure that amounted to a few dollars in American money. Not exactly killer prices. To us.

"Are those good shoes?" I asked.

"*Mucho* good," he answered dispassionately.

"How much does a guide get paid in a day?"

"Good guide, maybe—" He mentioned a fraction of the cost.

No wonder his shoes looked like they did. How could people afford to eat? How did this kid survive?

"Are you really a good guide?" I teased.

"You say," he countered.

"Do you want to get shoes today?" I asked.

"You like." His tone suggested that it didn't matter, although we both knew it did. So he was bracing himself against disappointment. How mature, if unnecessary.

"Where shall we buy shoes for you?"

"I go. You stay. Cheap."

I handed him a few hundred pesos and half expected that he would never come back. Not that you can go far on a few hundred. I followed several steps behind him to watch as he went to a shoe stall and bargained with the owner. Obviously the price quoted was too high, because Nelson flailed his arms and shouted. The old stall keeper was equally adamant, and both shouted as if the gods had to hear and make the decision for them. Finally Nelson simply turned around and took a few steps to leave. The chastised stall keeper made him a new offer, and he accepted, paid his money, took change, and tucked his new shoes under his arm.

Nelson went off at a half trot toward the spot where we had been sitting. He looked around and saw me also just arriving, although considerably more out of breath.

"*Mira*. Shoes."

"Put them on, I said. I didn't want them to be returned later for the money, and so they should be a little scuffed first.

"Money," he said, holding out the change.

"Keep it," I said. He wasn't surprised.

"What you want see now, Mister?"

The guide was still willing to be guiding. Where do these kids learn such responsibility? Surely that's not a concomitant of cash.

"What else is there?" We'd already seen the march of the volcanos, which were probably more impressive in the guide book descriptions than in actuality. A line of seven cones—as in Seven Wonders of the World or Seven Sisters of accounting or Seven Deadly Sins or Seventh Heaven. Seven. Popular number. How nice that nature thought to cooperate.

"*Ambato centro, mucho*. Here, *nada*." Class dismissed!

So we had done the fair to death. What else could I possibly expect of the day? Some sightseeing along the road as we returned, I suppose. But that's how I usually decided on spots to return to: Take a quick inventory first and return later if it's worthwhile. It works wonders in avoiding superficial commercial tours!

So we went back to the bus station, which was a wider and dusty patch beside the corrugated road, where the tarmac argued with the graveled edges while the buses chose sides. About the time that everyone's tempers became short, the bus lumbered into view.

"Here is." Nelson said without emotion. He was deadpan when he wanted to be. And that was usually. Unusual kid. Don't even think it—I'm not the adopting kind.

Ever the good guide, Nelson saw me to my unnumbered seat on the bus by his commandeering a seat acceptable to him. He put his index fingers to his eyes and called attention

to the windows at my disposal. He instructed me not to get off until Ambato. Fair enough, because this might have been the last bus trip of the day, and I shouldn't become stranded. But unpredictable bus schedules are the norm all over the world; so I understood.

Then he put a foot on the seat rail. "Thank you—shoes," he said with a touch of emotion.

"You're a very good guide, Nelson." And I saw him glow again. He'd probably had a month's ration of compliments in a single phase. Twice in a single day!

"Adios, Mister," he said.

With that, Nelson was gone. Forever. I never did get a shine, except in his face. And that was worth all the shoes in the world.

Author's note: An earlier version of this story appeared in the Fall, 2000, volume of the *Northwoods Journal*, A Magazine for Writers. Writers never stop revising. . . .and never see the opportunity more clearly than after the original has been committed to print.

#

TO BE A MAN

He was known as Toby, although that almost surely was not his African name. On the sea coast in an eastern corner of Ghana is a resort area composed of a tribal people who will let us bathe in the mountainous surf and will perform ancient dances for tourists. About thirty years of age and relatively short but muscled and educated, Toby was the guide for this segment of our week's stay on Africa's West Coast.

In our group, which was shepherded by a European international business organization, all the arrangements had been made long in advance, and the viewing of such disparate pieces of the human experience did not seem outlandish. Of course the meetings were therefore sanitized, and no one expected to make fast friends forever.

In this context we did challenge the tumultuous surf, losing ignominiously, and took trips through the jungle to see the new dam that was then being built, and marvel at the census numbers painted on mud huts, the early-basic style that seemed then to be the British-colonial method of taking our kind of civilization to wherever it was not particularly wanted or needed. At least that method was used (localized, of course) in Nigeria and Hong Kong, too. Toby did a fine job of not dwelling on the injustice.

On our final night, there was a huge bonfire, which provided unneeded warmth and much needed stage lighting for the bare-earth stage. Several dozen dancers and musicians whom we had not recognized as a troupe filed onto the stage. The dancers seemed to be preoccupied with anything else until the drums began to tap, tap and then bam, bam and then boom, boom. The percussions percussed and repercussed.

By a prearranged signal that I didn't hear or see, all of the dancers suddenly sprang into action in uniform circles and passings that alternated directions repeatedly after a fashion that was too complex for us to fathom, for it had few of the West's musical conventions. There were percussion and rhythm but no melodic strain or over-arching scheme that was perceptible to me despite my having had years of prior piano training. As it turned out in later conversations with our group, those imperceptible signals were not witnessed by anyone in our group. Much later, an American ballet dancer told me that her training included keeping multiple time-schemes simultaneously—one with the feet, another with the hands, and a third with the head. . .and then making the feet do what they were supposed to do in the appropriate time referenced. An AfroAmerican drummer to whom I'd related some of my African experience let me hear the rap, rap, rap that signaled changes in the rhythms and directions. Then I understood, and had our travel group known that before seeing the African dance, we might have more correctly understood and appreciated the differences in our cultures. . .which were not actually differences in humankind but caused-chasms between cultures and people.

Of course this was not a shortcoming of Toby's because how can people explain things that are unknown to them? He did, of course, ask the musicians to let us handle the ebony clack-sticks from which different tones could be coaxed by the knowledgeable. Drums were not for curiosity. He didn't blame the tourists for what colonization had done before independence, and he seemed genuinely pleased to be able to show us his world.

Following the dance, we were led just a short distance away to a buffet table that was obscene in its disregard for the dieters among us. Foods were heaped in array and disarray in both the African and European tradition and familiarities, and no one could have eaten some of everything. It ended with desserts that Vienna's *Demel* would have been proud of.

No purist, Toby was eager to try some of the Western foods that he had never seen before. And when we got to desserts, he took one of the tarts and savored it. . .and then went back for another. And another. Clearly, he was enjoying his Europeanization.

Now, so many days later, we already knew that Toby was married but that his wife never objected to his late nights with groups of tourists. She had no particular interest in seeing or joining the festivities, which were probably too much the same after once or twice. Now she simply waited at home for his arrival.

To be generous, one of our party suggested to Toby that he take a few of his favorite tarts back to his wife. Toby said *thank you* but declined. Most of us assumed that that was a matter of propriety in the circumstances in which he was a service worker, and not an equal, entitled to extra portions. So one of the women of our group got up, took several tarts and other sweets, and put them into a container. "Here. We want you to take them," she said. Toby declined again. Embarrassed to be turning down her offer, he walked away.

Later I caught up with him and asked him why—if he liked those tarts so much—*why* he didn't want to take the container. It was certainly a genuine offer from people who liked and respected him.

"It is not possible," said Toby.

"Why? I think your wife will like them as much as you do."

"Maybe. But she will not understand."

"Now I don't understand."

"She will ask me, 'Why must you bring things from strangers? Are you not a man who can support his own family?'" It is not possible."

"I'm sorry we pushed you, Toby. We didn't understand."

"I don't think *push*."

"I think so."

"But I understand kind people. Now we both have what we need, yes?"

"Yes. . . . Thank you."

It was never mentioned again. But someone in our group carried new bathing trunks still in the package. Those went to Toby because he had admired and borrowed mine a few hours earlier for an on-duty swim in those high sierras of the water, risking the disapproval of his employer in order to favor his new friends. Those trunks he accepted with profuse thanks because they were a simple gift and heart-felt. . .and acceptable to his wife, who would not expect him to account for a simple gift from strangers.

Should it require a trip to learn to know a little of what it must be like to be an African man? And one of them, at least, newly knows a little of what it is to be EuroAmerican. Can there be a bridge soon? And how do they survive, who are already in the middle?

SETTLING ON THE MEANING OF LIFE

He labored at his desk within a shower of ideas from the much-used but lately disused notebook and a cloud of dust from the pencil grinder. It was not easy to recapture either his youth or the initial meanings of those discussions, some of which were long ago. But if you'd also glanced over his shoulder at the thoughts that still fill his notebooks as he worked on his academic paper, you would need to think forbidden thoughts:

It isn't easy to say goodbye to someone you've known all of your life. Okay; so it really wasn't a lifetime in years, because we'd met only a few dozen years before. He was much older than I, but our rapport was so thorough that it seemed as if we'd known each other for all of our lives—and that has to count for something. He was my mentor long after he ceased to be my professor. And he first taught me to separate the concept of *personal belief system* from *religion* from *organized religion*.

Durwood (his mother's maiden name) was actually a philosopher, according to the appended alphabet. . .but more importantly and rarely, he had practical good sense. So it was no surprise when before too many after-class visits we centered on (non-classroom) discussions about topics that might be considered related to The Meaning of Life. Of course, in the early 60s, sociologist Viktor Frankl had asserted that life has no intrinsic meaning and that each life must be given some direction meaningful to one's self. That seems to make perfect sense now because of the myriad directions in which people find satisfaction or happiness—or the search for either, quite regardless of the success of the undertaking. But “now” was half of my life later than were Frankl's books.

So it wasn't a surprise when (despite classroom needs) we began to discuss one-half of the Thou Shalt Not discussions proscribed to polite society—and it wasn't the politics half. I'm going to give you the short version of our discussions, taken from my diary and containing quotes recorded soon after the fact. If I have personal observations to make, I'll place them outside the quotes. I tape recorded most; so they're quite accurate.

“I can accept anyone's belief in a god. . .with the proviso that the individual's belief is valid because no one can guarantee that it's right or wrong,” said Durwood simply. But religion is the business of trading on human insecurities and our will to have easy answers to the unanswerable.

“Organized religion is evil,” Durwood stated on another day when yet another untoward church incident had entered the newspapers. “It teaches people to look outside themselves for answers; and then it sells easy rote answers to unknown and unknowable questions. I can accept the word *god* only as a short-hand term for The Unknown and Unknowable. I call it the *Great God TUAU*. Worshiping the unknown is paganism. Besides, one can have faith in absolutely anything without imparting a modicum of legitimacy to that belief. Until after World War II, the Japanese believed that the Emperor was descended from the gods. Cows and monkeys are still considered sacred in India. Pork is proscribed in Israel. So anything that's considered essential or inexplicable can be preserved intact simply by making it sacred. Things feared, such as rancid meats, can be avoided by making avoidance an article of faith. Fear of pig flesh can be extended *ad absurdum* to fear of footballs and leather gloves and hog-bristle hairbrushes—as a matter of faith. And who would dare to argue with the ‘wisdom’ of the centuries.

"More important is the fact that we don't understand much of what can be seen around us. For instance, how did the Egyptians really move those blocks of stone that we'd have trouble with still today? Ditto for the massive figures on Easter Island. Is it possible that those people knew secrets of levitation that we have not yet re-discovered? That doesn't require a god."

Other pronouncements from other visits:

"The current slogan from scientists is that *it all looks like one grand thought*—but shouldn't everything be expected to be alike or at least compatible if everything proceeded from one Big Bang? That alone does not argue either for or against an independent consciousness that one can call a *god*. . .much less a humanized one. . .unless that's just a generic term for *source*.

"Moreover, when you consider the critical differences among the organized religions—all of which supposedly contain truths based on revelation, then we need to conclude either that god is schizophrenic (with judgments possibly not to be trusted) or that the "revelations" were interpretations acceptable essentially to the society and kings at that time (meaning not timeless), or that all "revelations" are true simultaneously (in which case we don't have a clue about the whole). Or you could say that either it's all true or there is no truth. . .and so it's all just fishwives' tales.

"Now, the religious organizations (in what looks like a move of a *faltering business*) are getting together to agree on a single, acceptable explanation—if ever they can. I thought we opposed monopolies. Should we continue to be terrorized by an intellectual, cash-collecting monopoly?"

"Consider only the most obvious of the fairy tales that are never explored: If Adam and Eve were actually the first and only humans; and if Noah's family were the only survivors of the flood, how did the world re-populate itself either time except by incest? If that were a god's will, why is incest anathema to us today? Do we know better than god?"

In looking back, and given the history of the world's religious upheavals, that might now seem to be essentially a no-brainer; but this was advanced thought at an early time in our current views. Hasn't Joseph Campbell now firmly established the underlying sameness of all the world's religious myths of gods-made-incarnate? But other thinkers had clues long before. Lately, both Saul/Paul and the story of the Exodus have been debunked. And discrepancies analyzed have shown how mightily the Bible's editors have shaped their material to serve as mind-control mechanisms. Evidently their computers weren't powerful enough to catch the gaffes. But it all benefitted the kings of the day, because who ever read all of it?

"Shakespeare noted the fearfulness of the unknown through Gloucester in *King Lear*: 'These late eclipses in the sun and moon [1604?] portend no good to us.' Fear of the unknown might be endemic in human kind, but promotion of baseless fears for the purpose of gaining control is despicable. And while we're in English, consider that Christopher Wren's cathedral is a monument to war with marble busts of warmongers and other of their heroes. How ungodly!

"One can believe in anything essential to stasis whether or not that belief involves truth. And that proves the triumph of the religious art of perpetrating a most juvenile dependence in the name of reasoned adulthood. As a society, we need to admit that the appeal to *faith* is an inverse admission that 'We don't know those answers either—so don't ask'."

Days later, Durwood continued: "Throughout all history, organized religions have been among the power structures and should not have been expected to help to dismantle themselves. Organized religion has for thousands of years been on the side of the kings or current power structures in providing control of the masses. Kings controlled the body, and religions controlled the mind. What's left except the 'freedom' to believe in any of several prescribed ways? Or, as

Henry Ford said of his Model T, ‘. . . Any color as long as it’s black.’

“Both religions and kings had discovered the dependable conditioning and permanent control power of guilt among unquestioning persons. Give them guilt about taxes and their bodies, and they can’t escape and won’t dare to rock the boat. Moreover, they will convert that guilt into an *approved good* and will further perpetrate against others the evils that it contains. So we have the most private of ideas bandied about as pop phrases, such as ‘Praise the Lord’. Is their god so insecure that it needs such pablum?

“You could say,” Durwood complained during one session, “that the countless religions (some now seen to be patently false, although widely believed then) have been intellectually the painted whores of kings and other rulers.” That was certainly his most stunning pronouncement among many. Then: “Religions as a class have no legitimate claim to be the arbiters of our ethics . . . possibly not even of our contemporary morality. They must then do a compensating good.”

With that he went on to a topic more at hand. . . my inadequately-conceived paper on the topic. . . which not only had I not finished then but still haven’t finished. . . maybe because I’m still not sure of the answers!

But he was not one to forget, and on another occasion he picked up as if the earlier comments had never been truncated. “Letting a god worry about problems is like having your parents worry for you when you were a child. Anything untoward that happens can then be called *god’s will*, not our own or anyone else’s fault. Of course, some ancient religions practiced infant sacrifice. Is it possible that a widely-believed religion could yet be false? Cults still practice that type of thought-control. In that sense, organized religion is regressive and highly opportunistic. Most children believe in, and practice for a lifetime, whatever organized religion that their parents practiced—is this freedom or further thought control against the powerless?

“Besides, as nasty as it sounds, both Hitler and Stalin re-discovered the power of exerting that central, life-long control over children, ala religion or its equivalent, because then any mode of propaganda will tend to stunt their mental growth in the chosen areas. If you get to children early enough and distort their perceptions sufficiently, then reality becomes irrelevant—possibly for an entire lifetime! How else could the organized religions countenance slavery in the US or elsewhere in the world or its earlier substitution of serfs for slaves in Russia? Or how could they participate in the rape of the Indians of South America or the rape of China early in the Twentieth Century or support the Caste system in India? Or how can they still endorse the concept of hereditary kingships when (possibly excepting the originator of the dynasty) that is the epitome of the non-merit system and so is injurious to the superior individual of any class?

“All of those systems are inherently evil. No one could benefit more than the kings and nobles of the time, even thousands of years ago. And what’s changed since? Surely not the will of some persons to rule over others. . . aided and abetted by religion.

“Well, kings are in the Bible, even if we as Americans wish to be rid of them and to substitute movie stars. Must women *obey* their husbands still? Or can we pick and choose? If so, that suggests that religion is only a cudgel to be used against unpopular ideas. So then, is the Bible subject to selective interpretation according to the then-current wish—otherwise how could the organized religions function here or anywhere? Isn’t that flexible. . . whenever necessary to its own survival? Then how do we contend that such arbitrary religious morality is not also flexible? How do we account for such egregious discrepancies without using the fine word *hypocrisy*?” Aristotle, again.

By this time, I had graduated. That gave me a not-unwelcome distance from Durwood’s irascibility but also the emotional distance to permit a slow digestion of some of his more hefty

pronouncements.

So, according to my understanding of Durwood's thrust, organized religion knowingly helped kings to deliver abundant guilt about cheating on your taxes; and they themselves delivered guilt about not paying your religious tithe and guilt about sex, which is only a natural animal function—but universal! No one is free from it. How effective and universal a control mechanism, that pair!

“When people dare not live their own preferred lives, what power the guilt-maker wields! Simply look about the world to see the differences in homogeneous but natural human kind . . . differences that have been engendered by early differing wants and needs of specific kings and their early environments. Now that varied folkways have been glamorized by the appellation of tradition, the world chooses wantonly to preserve those ancient control mechanisms simply as ‘traditional’ customs and folk mores that help to divide. Valued, yes. . .but to whom for what purposes? Traditional to whom? Surely not to all human kind in each instance—there are too many differences now. And isn't a promise of life everlasting—against the threat of eternal torment—enough to whip everyone into line? Who has been able to come back to complain about such probable falsehoods? Besides, social scientists have long ago established that such folkways and mores persist long after the reasons for their creation have been forgotten.”

Well, not everyone gets whipped into line, literally. Certainly not our Durwood. On that day, as with all the others, we dropped the incidental observations and went on to more pressing classroom-related business. Nor did he suppose that any person could do any thing to any other person at any time. He knew that rules of conduct are essential but felt that we should consider them to be necessary evils, rather than as pure social goods. On that basis, the Republicans can justify some of their dislike of big government. And love, delivered as fairness, is likely the basis for law, which should attempt to provide at least some semblance of justice to the judged. . .or revolutions can happen, as we should know.

Without fail, the birth topic was back again. This time it was the result of the anti-abortion demonstrations by the holier-than-thou persons who believe—against all Constitutional guarantees—that the foes have the god-given right to deprive other citizens of their rights and privacy. Coercion by groups of religious fanatics is a part of our national history, witness the famous Colonial witch hunts and current political correctness. They are unlike only in the matter of degree. Victims are not burned at the stake any longer—they're simply ‘fried’ in the press. Of course near-term reference to political correctness neatly overlooks the fact that the Pilgrims themselves were already egregiously coercive . . .or, for that matter, it ignores the knowledge that the Mayflower was crewed partly by some sailors who were kidnaped at the English port so that a few other “freedom-seeking” people could be repressive themselves when finally they were relieved, at their destination, of traditional religious repression. Machiavelli has argued that the ends justify the means—and evidently the Puritans (who kidnaped part of their sailing crew) agreed—but is that a godly view? Ethical? Then what is the value—if any—of those Puritan traditions we so value?”

What about the rights of those sailors who were kidnaped? An old adage, much quoted, states loosely that history is only the victor's version of what happened; and whether Nehru borrowed that comment or created it is not generally known. “Americans love fairy tales about their own national beginnings,” Durwood said with a hint of disgust. “We can even overlook the founding of the for-profit colony of Jamestown, which had a theatre in today's Virginia in the same year that the first Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock! Well, Plymouth Rock survived and

Jamestown did not, which can not be seen as *ipso facto* proof of some god's intent; although it's posited these days that religious intolerance might have been an indirect cause. Religious freedom as a national foundation, indeed! Humankind more likely needs *freedom from religion*! But the Thanksgiving harvest feast is a good harvest tradition, nonetheless, and probably enjoyable for everyone but the turkey. . . ." Then that topic was abandoned.

Back to the anti-abortion issue, on another visit. "No one will argue that human life should not be sanctified in every case as a matter of justice," Durwood said. "On the other hand, there is so much suffering and abuse and starvation associated with unwanted children that *the ability to prevent the unwanted child from being conceived should be celebrated as being godly in the extreme!* To create more children than can be cared for properly is not a gift to any god! Especially in an over-populated world. Religions should be teaching contraception! Then people wouldn't depend so much on the abortion that the religious claim to want to eliminate. But the religions won't accept the prevention of conception because that flies in the face of their centuries of support for kings, who needed larger populations in order to overcome high infant mortality rates and to gain new lands (by war) and to populate them and to levy new taxes (by divine right, it was told).

"How godly of the religions to assist in those kingly undertakings! Given the need for aggressive childbearing, every variation on sexuality that did not plant seed for reproduction must be excoriated (*Planting seed* is pronounced '*fuck*' in the Old Anglo-Saxon language). Yes, the most poetic of all related terms is now the most vilified. Most likely because it's a four-letter word. . . like *hope* and *help* and *warm* and *cool* and *wish* and *want* and *like*—and *love*! Those seem to be in some disrepute, too."

It's Catch 22 for the religions, I realized. "Now that kings are going out of business, the religions are busily trying to change sides in the battle for control of the masses so as to try to justify the unjustifiable past, and that's not always very successful. But they're still playing to the power structures. That gets people killed in 'godly' religious wars everywhere from Renaissance Europe to South America to Africa to India and its partitioned neighbors to Palestine and the nearby Jihads." *Godly religious wars*? Didn't we have more than enough of them during the Crusades and in pagan/Catholic Rome? But what a money-maker for religions! Collections for every facet of the suffering! Treat the symptoms and collect. No solutions of course. Solutions end collections!"

Durwood seemed content with that pronouncement for that day. But he forgot nothing, and on another of my increasingly infrequent visits he picked up where he had stopped:

"Unfortunately, the case can be made that organized religion has often tried to preserve ignorance as a means of maintaining control. Consider Galileo, who was four hundred years in winning absolution for believing that the sun was the center of our solar system. And that happened long after Copernicus was forced to recant his theory of the planetary system until he averred on his deathbed: 'It moves!' Then Tycho and Kepler were persecuted; so Galileo's experience was not a single aberration. But the revised planetary system, too, was censored knowledge when first proposed, because in its infinite wisdom, the Christian Church knew that the Ptolemaic view of an Earth-centered universe would be what god wanted and had actually wrought. Not only does it move, but it's not flat, this Earth. An offense to the heavens, no doubt!

"That people can now know the facts and yet retain their fear of *a vengeful god* is a tribute to the power of the religions to overwhelm the intellect. Or consider the original discouragement of reading ability among the masses, when only priests should learn to read. That control technique was also used by Christians in the rape of South America among the Indians; and again sanctioned by religions in the rape of China by European entrepreneurs and missionaries only a century ago;

and again by church-going slave owners in the American South, too. So therefore religion must have been condoning injustice. How godly! Do I repeat myself?

“Or consider the refusal of religions and kings to permit unauthorized editions of world maps when printing became quite capable of rendering accurate images. The Copernican cosmic view of the planetary system, banned by the Christian Church, was known long before to the ancient Egyptians, via Aristarchus. Besides, if everything came from the same thing in the Big Bang, then it’s hardly profound to discover that there are distinct relationships among everything that survives. It sounds so pious to say that the universe looks like a giant thought! But it’s like saying that parents are brilliant for intuiting the names that everyone will ultimately want to use in order to call their children!”

That was the end of that day’s private lecture, but it surely wasn’t the end:

Or consider book censorship. We so proudly proclaim it to be *not our style* when “. . . the most obvious exception to that lie is the 1952 book *The Stream of American History*, by Leland Baldwin.” It seems that the views of neither Baldwin, James nor Leland, were welcome in their days. In those rabidly anti-communist days, “Leland was vilified for telling the truth about the crude beginnings and later curious circumstances of this country. . . which items were construed to acknowledge that we were not perfect, as we are in our fairy tales histories. Well, of course, we are perfect! Officially!” And in order to obtain hope of benefit from his years of work, “Baldwin was forced to rewrite his text into a one-volume travesty shorn of criticisms and given reverse twistings of his once-ringing observations and unconventional pronouncements about our fairy-tale past. His perceptive and truthful original book has now become just an also-ran, ‘third-edition’ text of little note. It didn’t need to be burned in order to be destroyed—it was simply censored to death.” Advertising pressure can now take care of the rest of the independent views, because now the money-grubbers will publish only established ‘safe’ controversies that insult no one *important*. “Where have all the Ida Tarbell-style Robber Baron stories gone, along with their recountings of the shootings of revolting workers in Colorado and Michigan by now-revered conglomerates? Why? Revisionists, Awake!”

Startled, I looked up the book, *The Stream of American History*, originally issued in two separate hard-cover editions—one for the press and another for the public. It isn’t easy to find. The bowdlerized third edition (that many persons feel that Baldwin was *forced* to participate in writing) is in fact obscenely distorted. But the book burning is a true historical circumstance, easy to comprehend when viewing the original texts. It was becoming more difficult to dismiss any of the unconventional views of Durwood.

So I myself brought up the abortion issue on another occasion.

“Are you aware,” he asked, “that some religious organizations also opposed medical surgery in its early days on the grounds that medicine was *playing god*? How much *good* has come of the medical invasiveness that some religions oposed? Did an all-knowing god not foresee that particular good or not approve of it—regardless of the view of organized religious? Doesn’t it appear that the religions would willingly have foregone all the benefits of surgery to human kind in order to maintain fear and guilt and ignorance in their members and the world at large? And how much *good* will the religions force us to forego now that we can easily prevent unwanted pregnancies?”

“And to be indecently direct, if a god created Adam and Eve as sole persons, and if Noah’s family were the only persons to survive the Flood, how did the world repopulate itself except by incest?. And if that were a god’s will, why should incest be in such disrepute today? Obviously, we must understand ancient myths as allegory, even if we can find stone ruins in places mentioned.”

We stopped for coffee at this time, but Durwood was on a roll, and he came back to the topic without urging.

“Shouldn’t the ability to prevent unwanted life be considered the very highest level of conundrum ever to be placed before mankind? Is it truly *not the will of god* that man should have discovered ways to prevent unwanted pregnancies and births, or are contemporary religions still serving the political dictates of kings of millennia past because they can’t admit their error? Or is a god simply helpless before the wisdom of its creature? Shouldn’t every new child be a *wanted* child? If there are fewer *unwanted* children, will population begin to drop quickly? And that leads to the questions of why so few of these religious fanatics should fail to adopt (or otherwise properly support) more of the unwanted children whose birth they *cause* because of their narrow view of god’s will; or why these supposedly godly cheerleaders should be permitted to condemn defective and unwanted foetuses to life. Of course: by what definition is *defect*? Lip service and easy religiosity are no substitute for moral fibre! What *moral majority*? What *hypocrisy*!

“If philosophers through the ages (including pre-Christian Lao-Tze and Buddha) have been unable to choose definitively between what we know as Kantian ideas of individualism and those of Aristotle’s independent but not rule-bound Virtue Ethics or the Utilitarian greatest-good mode, how despicable it is that one group of unthinking but officious and *public piety-performers* and priests (acting as self-appointed arbiters) should inflict their myopic views on the world!

“But Bertrand Russell made these points and more beginning over a century ago and for fifty years following. I think he might have argued religion as if it would yield to rational discussion, whereas, because of emotion, investigation probably relates better to the situation when it argues *ad absurdum*. But the churches and schools turned on him when he was offered a teaching post in New York City. Brilliance is fine. . . within stated limits. Russell exceeded theirs!

“Russell also quoted Thomas Paine who wrote, in *The Age of Reason*:

“I believe in one God and no more; and I hope for happiness in this life. I believe in the equality of man, and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow creatures happy.’ Contrast that to the thou-shalt-not crowd.”

I’m not embarrassed to admit that I had to read in Kant and Aristotle and Russell again before accepting the latest of Durwood’s arguments. But, probably you might want to read those thinkers again, also. I would not have the temerity to attempt to encapsulate those thinkers’ concepts in a few lines. . . even if that were possible.

There are gaps in my diary caused by long periods of our not visiting in later years. Occasionally, months or years passed. Visiting with Durwood was a fascinating chore, desirable but most exhausting and not always easy to look forward to after graduation. Yet something kept me going back for other discussions—or *listenings*, which would be more accurate an assessment: exposure to proscribed ideas. It had the charm of the forbidden but also the smack of truth!

Durwood also challenged “the abscess of moralistic theory” that produced countless early pronouncements about moral turpitude as the cause of such ills as alcoholism and other addictions or dementia and other ills that we are now finding to be related to chemical imbalances in the brain supposedly created by god. Even Presidential wives and actresses can be forthright now. No one can be blamed for old time lack of current knowledge, but they can be faulted for pretending that age-old ignorance was in fact sacred knowledge.

“Is god inept? Or careless? Or simply unconcerned? Or non-existent? Or does that matter to only the salesmen of organized religion? Who could even conceivably comprehend a god that can invent the cosmos? Would you ask an ant to describe the planet Earth?” Durwood was

adamant.

"But on what shall we base the concept of *sanctified*? That's a religious concept. So unless we want to be tangled in the vestments of religions forever, we need to return to the ethical acceptance of *love* as the direction (and, we hope, source) of future human life. Without love, there would have been no gregariousness in the early human animal. Without that early gregariousness there would almost surely have been no protection that numbers can offer. Without numbers there could have been no settlements or farming. Without that, no cities. No modern civilization, if ours is civil.

"Yes, the greedy still insist that man is a predatory animal engaged in the survival of the fittest—but that self-serving apologia of today overlooks the whole of the civilizing influences that preceded our civilization, *if* it be civilized. Animals don't pretend to evolve civilizations: they are now what they were then.

"Without love, there is probably nothing of value in life. With love you will have ethics, which helps to preserve the best inclinations of the race. Those ethical rules of Aristotle were Pre-Christian! But ethics has no hard-and-fast rules which religions can point out in order to cause guilty people to pay dearly as *deserved* punishment for breaking! Every ethically questionable situation should be judged on its own merits; that flexibility belongs to ethics alone! *In an ethical world, religion would be extraneous!*" No wonder that the religions refuse to teach ethics to the masses! Give me a thousand or two thousand years to mull it over, and I'll find an easy answer for any question you might ask. . .even if I have to invent one. . .as they did.

"Nevertheless, those two thousand years of sameness are not an advantage. . .they are precisely the problem. People today are being held back to the understandings and prejudices and gullibilities and superstitions of long-ago peoples. To suggest that *truth is immutable* is not itself unwise, but to suggest that *those superstitions are truth forever* is sophistry at its worst!"

By the time he had made this last pronouncement, I was visiting him in his hospital room, which he had little hope of leaving intact. So I puffed his pillows and got fresh ice water, which mattered only as a visible token of esteem, because he rarely drank the water.

He's gone, now. It's taken a long time for me to digest the ideas he set out. . .and it will take a good deal longer to try to understand how the world can ignore the logic of his arguments other than as the result of unbridled self-interest among the offenders. "Would *selfishness* be a more apt word? Are we hypocritical in requiring an easy, ready-made, *politically correct* answer for every question. . .and then for teaching that fiction to children as truth, ala Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny? No wonder that children learn to distrust. And how long, for example, will we insist on vilifying marijuana as a public evil because otherwise an incipient police state would need to concentrate on solving crime? . . .which might not exist to such a degree without patronage in high places!"

Finally, and probably most damningly, I need to consider the near-death testaments of both my mother (an occurrence during my childhood but discussed often in years following) and, much later, my brother. My mother had been psychic for all of her adult life in a very narrow range of receptions—but it was infallible. So her one-time near-death experience was just a little aside on the paranormal-as-quite-ordinary. A quarter century before reports began appearing in print, my mother related then the now-traditional tunnel with light at the end. She concluded that she would never again fear death.

My brother reported an out-of-body-experience (describing to assisting professionals their attending events and discussions) during the goings-on in the hospital room during his accidental *death* and resuscitation. . .stunning them by quoting their words and bodily locations.

Both of my family members reported that their first feeling was one of infinite peace, and the next thought was sorrow for those loved ones who had to remain behind. Why should I accept the versions of practiced storytellers? How does that comport with tales of fire and brimstone beyond? If the paranormal became normal to me early in life, it cannot now become the source of such fear as can demand the easy answers and tithes of organized religion.

Besides, during my youth, I myself had had out-of-body experiences that were pleasant enough so that I sought them at first but later avoided them as scary, when I became old enough to try to comprehend them. And I have felt the emanations of the ancient altar room in the Great Pyramid at Ghiza. In later years, interludes of extrasensory perception, precognition, thought transference, and clairvoyance (which are probably all related) were not uncommon—only unpredictable in me. But they were certain and true when they happened!

Moreover, two of my friends were psychic; one was a religious layman and the other was an irreligious minister. Both (who did not know each other) told me highly compatible details about my own personal past and present life and events involving third persons in public life or friends known to me but not to them. One of the seers told often of watching the flow of the targeted life as tableaux or still photos flipping in the style of old “motion” cartoons. That’s long been discussed in common cliché (***** **French accent acute**) as “life passing before your eyes.” He did it regularly, as a part of his gift, and it did not accompany a near-death experience. The other psychic friend received information of two types: one to be shared with his subject; and the other, veiled, and never to be told. Of course I discussed all of that with Durwood.

“And if any consciousness or conscious awareness (call it *soul* or *spirit* if you must) should endure beyond our pre-death (or immediate post-death), that still does not either establish or deny the existence of a god. In this circumstance, the idea of god is merely the first and easiest available explanation, and it is a throwback to one of our earliest and longest conditioning processes. So why subject ourselves voluntarily now to re-enslavement to ancient ideas about the nature of life and the universe? Childhood ideas die hard! This is the time to search for previously-undiscovered truths!”

He’s right: Isn’t this precisely the time for the exploration of new concepts and dimensions and other possible explanations? We do not know that such end-tunnel light is the ultimate end, rather than an interim point; nor that the lighted being is god rather than a gatekeeper. Lacking the equivalent of a neon sign stating “This is god,” we must expect all later descriptions to be couched in the language of the familiar: we cannot easily describe the previously-inexperienced. We can make and transfer meanings only via the common experiences of the speaker and listener. Keep in mind, therefore, that the explanations and descriptions of a “lighted being” can be couched only in the language of the individual’s own (religious?) experience and can be comfortably understood only in the normal or common conventions of our current world.

“The real problem is that we can’t conceive of *what we can’t conceive of!* So any unquestioned argument for god serves merely to turn the blame for orchestrating the mess on planet Earth away from the ruling classes through the ages. Blame it all on god—so convenient and unarguable! It is also self-serving on the part of the religions and kings! And if this is god’s *one grand thought*, must we suppose that god has had only one thought—or might there be other creatures in infinite numbers of other realms, resulting from additional thoughts. . .all equal in stature to our own?”

Putting all of this together, we’re led to conclude that our minds are already part of another realm that we cannot comprehend now. Better, *not yet* comprehend! But if my family could enter and leave that other dimension, and if my friends could do it at will and without a “death”

experience, it appears that humankind merely lacks ready access to that potential now. . . an ability that humankind can surely develop and elevate. It likely relates in some way to feminine intuition and children's fantasies and animal communication—if we're willing to see those elements as facets of it.

And many highly creative people admit that they don't always "originate" their works but simply tap into a hidden place where the concept is already whole; and they essentially provide only mechanical transcription in print or song or paint. Maybe that's what Duke Ellington alluded to when he said that he "wrote" some songs within an hour or less. Didn't he mean that he simply annotated the complete melodies that leaped into his head?

It suggests, further, that the unknown dimension sometimes called "heaven" is very near; but that hell is perhaps here in the trials of earth by which we seek to perfect ourselves in an ethical sense. Let religion continue to minister to bodily needs and beneficial social principles if it can—although the Greeks did it earlier and, in some ways, probably better via Aristotelian ethics.

One can admit that unsophisticated people who probably could not read or write needed parables and homilies to guide them (and even some of us might need them today) toward what can be considered moral and ethical lives and decisions—but that admission does not legitimize the rigid religious conclusions about the nature of god. . . if there be one. Also, the works of Plato and the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* contain descriptions compatible with those of today's near-death experiences. There's an immutability, if you need one! But why isn't it embraced by the religions? Must religious cults operate exclusively on ignorance?

"Obviously," Durwood believed, "if personal belief systems can operate without a middle-man, religion will be irrelevant. Ethics can make a liveable world via the ethical individual alone!" And Aristotle said it best: *to do the more admirable deed when there is a choice.*

But let us still continue to explore the potentials of the other dimensions of the mind! To put it in words that Durwood had already used: "Therefore we must condemn the organized religions of the world for keeping us mired in the ideas of the backward times and unsophisticated intelligence of the masses of two thousand years ago. Perhaps only to protect their own interests, organized religions are ignoring or otherwise preventing progress in our learning about the supernatural although countenancing progress in nearly any other aspect of life. . . excepting medicine and the control of life. Thought control—just as with reading and writing and pronouncements on the nature of the universe in centuries past. Why should we know we can progress (and have in fact progressed) in knowledge and things worldly but dare not marvel at other-worldly things of infinite wonder just outside our present grasp?"

And if the place called hell should be this place on earth, then isn't death a welcome and earned release? And then shouldn't we celebrate when a loved one has won release? Now there's a new conundrum for you; and it might even be worthy of Durwood himself.

Durwood taught me (and countless others in his classes, I suppose) to think about the real and paranormal world and to challenge the easy assumptions and conventional wisdoms of this one. And his *going* with absolute faith in his religious faithlessness was probably the most courageous of his many deeds and pronouncements. For if there were a god, could it fail to appreciate and elevate the integrity and conscientious objections of this paragon of thought—right or wrong? And, therefore, shouldn't this man of integrity, Durwood, be preserved forever. . . if there is an awareness of forever after Earthly death?

Has Durwood settled *The Meaning of Life* for you? Maybe not. Now, I'm not going to tell you that he should have shown you how silly it is to refuse to think. . . and so merely to worry about the unknown and unknowable in religious terms (his *Great God TUAU*). Although *he* might have

told you that. Instead, I'll just say that you should probably be able to find a worthwhile value in your life and live that life with integrity and ethics! Now, how could any god (if there be such a thing) fail to recognize and reward the intrinsic good of that?

As for that business of trying to understand or explain a god, how can any invention explain its inventor? And in what other aspect of life do we demand such foolishness?

All things considered, there's relatively little left to question in the concept of life-after-death. And that might mean that the grand new question is: If our thoughts survive our temporal life, what happens to those thoughts when the brain ceases to emanate electrical charges? And when should those thoughts end by dissipation through radiation in a cosmos that's forever winding down?

And then what?

Having read through his notes and having made a few more, he concluded that it was becoming easier to understand the concepts of his paper, but he was finding it more difficult to coordinate the myriad pieces. Is that why it's so much easier to use old religious crutches rather than to relearn to think in another mode? The manly student closed his notebook and walked away, thinking:

Durwood, if you're listening. . .I think you might be right!

End