

38. Watching & Waiting

Random observations and thoughts about them are some natural constant. Brain triggers memories of bits and pieces of conversation, experiences, media, too much television, video inputs, and whatnot. Automobiles and television had irrevocably twisted American culture. Al had to stop watching to find time to write. Allowed himself to dream, then had to clamp down and do work, or free association this creates goes nowhere. Strange sort of irony, limiting input to produce, since it seems antithetical to stifle all other thought to concentrate on some narrow, specific idea. Everyone has a book inside waiting to explode, like a ticking bomb, but, fortunately, worldly worries usually intervene. In Amnesty International's political diatribe, "Closet Land", torturer complains to innocent storyteller being emotionally broken, "I don't trust lonely people, life's eternal spectators, watching and waiting." If you don't swallow torment they're force feeding daily, you'll always be treated as a subversive or terrorist. Dissidence or even stubborn disobedience should never invite ostracism or torture. You're almost always justified questioning motives of coaches, leaders and tycoons, who try to make you think they are just lucky versions of you. If your immune system still works, you'll barf up all their lies.

Extracting certain mental images can be disturbing. Minds weren't meant to absorb so much and hold it all in. Mostly though, details were pure drivel. Does that mean they're not important and worthwhile? Or does fact you remember them at all elevate their importance, even if you can't make that connection? Psychoanalyzing oneself may result in narcissism but what of something useful, like inner strength or precognitive abilities or self awareness? You're the sum of your participations, elected yourself or forced upon you. If totally focused on hunting down mysteries, one must continually exhume buried memories. He couldn't keep this up, winking in and out from conscious to subconscious. It was too tiring, akin to sleep deprivation brainwashers use, bound to make one gullible to suggestion and strip away identity, "I am not a person." Without self recognition, how can you say you're alive? Without identity, meaning is meaningless. Surely, you may grant yourself identity without pride or sin.

Observations about nothing are nothing. When they're about doing, they shine, but only to those who do the same. Observations aren't even facts, after all, actually modify facts by merit of being

noticed then interpreted. But experience does bring knowledge. Observing ordinary things closely mattered on some galactic scale imperceptible to mere mortals. After traveling far and wide, lavender and phlox in his own garden smelled sweeter than anything he encountered elsewhere. When in their country, observe their customs, to be sure. When in your own, be yourself, they say, though they mean a best version of yourself. But unless bullets are flying, it's hard to stay alert and vigilant, take in everything going on around you, understand what it means.

Sitting outside a chain drugstore, he noticed some Latinos walk out with a watch, throw it on a wrist, and toss aside its container. A security guard rushed out to confront them after an automatic alarm tripped. Seems container had an electronic tag. Did cheats steal watch or did checker neglect to remove tag? Being Latinos, they were instantly typecast as petty thieves. Suddenly systems of inventory security by bar coding which triggered alarms didn't seem very secure at all, penetrable with human interaction or lack thereof. Racial profiling just redirects hatred to easier targets, while those who really ravage remain invisible further up supply chain. Wondered about all those container ships customs inspectors never check, vectors for illegal contraband piggybacked among cheap imports headed to discount outlets along with dirty bombs and neutron Armageddon.

During late '60's big boom in cycling, you had to keep a hand on your bike at all times. Locking did little to stem theft. Bikes were rare and thus desirable, recently upgraded to into 10-speeds with better ease and broader range, whereas they're now cheap and common, worthless among Americans chronically addicted to convenience. Yet jitensha theft is now Japan's most popular crime. He relied on his bike as his primary form of ghetto transit; if stolen, it'd create panic. Relationships with a bike are fragile. Getting one stolen is enough to break your heart. If your car is stolen, you immediately replace it, if you can afford to. A stolen bike, though, put you off forever. Once he walked 29 steps into a corner store for a drink, parched after water bottle ran dry, not 1 minute of transaction time, and returned to find someone riding off on his shiny red Schwinn. Luckily, a friend happened by with a fast car, and they tracked down thief after several miles of highway. Thief would've gotten away clean on a more sensible course along back streets. Hemmed in on a limited access road, they inevitably overtook this numskull.

Never felt more of an urge to pummel someone senseless, become the red rider whose sword starts an all consuming battle.

Instead counted to 10, asked for a name and what thief was doing in his vicinity. Adult dolt volunteered facts about a visit with a supposed girlfriend, Catena Corrente, who they knew to be an adolescent prostitute, jail bait, statutory rape, at least by reputation if not personal experience. They let quaking miscreant go, who raced to chainlink fence and scaled it as if a prison break. What else could they do? Justified assault is still illegal. This underscores linkage among atrocities, where lenience for victimless violations leads to acts with actual victims. Seemed petty, but consequences could have been grave: No way to get to school or work, stuck at home, walking great distances through slums, or, worse, take terrible busses, which lumbered along piloted by mean fatties spewing filth which was not just diesel smoke. "Correct change or get off!" Without a bike, he'd be a prisoner. Bike thefts can have horrible consequences. Thieves only care about what they momentarily need or their next shot of smack, and never long term hardships of those from whom they steal. Had he a cell phone then, probably would've held on until deputies arrived and extent of charges escalated. Don't rapists and thieves deserved to be jailed?

His younger brother had been attacked by a gang in a car right on US-1, a major road constantly traveled before interstates were built, in plain view of scores of indifferent onlookers. Knocked to ground, Greg wrapped a leg around bike foiling snatcher, and wailed away with his lock chain at others. Not expecting such a furious refusal they bolted. Suffering bruises and cuts, Greg decided to report license plate. Later, when officers pulled over and questioned gang, one of them blurted out, "We didn't try to steal any bike!" Oops. Busted. Never saw them again. Other brothers had bikes stolen but miraculously retrieved them. Once dad noticed a bike with handlebars distinctively wrapped just like son's in a garage in an adjacent community. Confronting thief's mother with a threat to call cops, she handed it over. Another was found thrown from a rail overpass. His oldest brother attended college downtown after 'Nam-era naval service, entitled by GI Bill. Lenny was trying to find a better life and forget stench of war. Chained bike properly, steel links around both wheels and frame to a wrought iron fence, veritably welded down. After classes, Lenny came out to nothing but a few snapped links and a long walk home. Dream of a bike melted away into a wide city. Break out a bus schedule.

Months later, he had to get his wheels trued; his only other way to nearest bike shop 10 miles distant was to hike himself or hitchhike. Teens used to do that then, and it's still safe in some

nonindustrialized nations. A fellow cyclist saw him carrying wheels and offered a lift. "Where ya headed... Really? Going that way, too." Something was odd about bike crammed into back of that English sportscar. Didn't know why, but he memorized serial number embossed on head tube close to his face. Thanked driver then hurried in with his wheelset. Borrowed a pen and wrote down license plate and number, so as not to forget. Waited for work to be done, then wound up walking home. When he got there, asked Lenny what stolen bike's serial number was. Luckily, it was recorded on paperwork that hadn't yet been trashed. With car's description and plate, took detectives minutes to nab thief and recover bike. Prosecuting wasn't possible, though, as thief was the only son of city's police chief. You could invent a story as malicious and subversive, but, truth be known, you seldom have to. Those with unearned privileges abuse them. That you do need police betrays the fact that too many, in an aberration of independence, don't abide laws and make life miserable for those who do. Police deserve every respect until they cross unwritten lines.

A mom driving family's minivan was barreled into and killed by a patrol car driven over 80 mph down a steep, twisty country hill. She never knew what hit her, dead, grieving loved ones, orphaned infants. State cop used neither flashing lights nor siren, wasn't responding to a call, just going home from work. Bicyclists he knew train on same hill, narrow though it is. Patrolman took advantage of the fact that cops sometimes had to drive fast and would probably never be questioned, never mind cited, when they should be acting responsibly and setting a good example.

Since most people are honest, willingly stick by laws, what really needs to be done is eliminate privileges, hold everyone equally accountable, increase oversight of those holding public office, even randomly reexamine those in positions of power. Isn't that what press was supposed to do? Instead you get tabloid nonsense. Morning anchor Katie Cantread used to waste your time bolstering powers that be and bubbling personal banalities. Systematic random audits of administrators would increase honesty, but such actions take a commitment that networks and newspapers can no longer afford. Not enough people read anymore. Who can keep up with so many scandals? You'd be foolish trusting public at large, but how should you deal with those who've you appointed or elected into positions of trust after they betray you?

Imagine spending time chasing celebrities around, reporting on their hairstyles, or what they are wearing, or with whom they slept. How superficial are media wags and their paid paparazzi?

How inane are readers who consume such pabulum? Blatant advertising and self-promotion had wormed into entertainment to such a degree that nobody was appalled by infomercials, prattle fests with political plants and salesmen, and product placements in films and on television. If they can spout self-serving bias, why couldn't he spout mass-serving rebuttals? People who don't go berserk at every provocation should earn respect. A nation that doesn't take on entire World's problems will be fine. Extremism doesn't find balance, leans toward a polarity, magnifies problems. Personal interpretations and whimsical flights of fancy are amusing and interesting; gross departures, insensitive attention grabbers, and totalitarian edicts are not.

Entertainment used to be dignified. Storytelling for the sake of spending some enjoyable time together, a civilized art, had largely been lost. Tough to compete with action packed epics. Simple narrators just give up. People settle for whatever distractions are available, run away from charitable acts of burying dead, clothing naked, feeding the hungry, giving shelter to homeless, nursing sick, visiting each other. Attracts common folk who can't help you advance. Any promise that you'll not die of starvation shouldn't have to be purchased by a guarantee that you'll instead die of boredom. Better to chase celebrities, they conclude. This was changing. Reality television began to present ordinary oafs, but then turn them into personalities, talentless imitations of real stars. It's amateur porn, cheap to produce, shot to cruelly use people, take advantage of their dreams. One might see this contrarily, as a record of hoards of people engaging in some momentary fantasy, a small slice of what it means to be an actual star, or, on the other hand, a total perversion of normal people from productive lives in valuable enterprises, not real in the least, staged spectacles in which nobody gets hurt. PBS documentaries were closer to reality, but even they were biased. He produced a few himself, and knew.

Of all existing media, film possesses biggest potential for engaging you on multiple levels. There were films he'd watched several times without tiring of them, always noticing another facet: actors themselves, colorful costumes, delightful scenery, exquisite staging, fantastic music. Most watch them as a recreational diversion, unaware of their propaganda. If society was 10% as dysfunctional as films portray, nobody would survive the next few hours. Films sow values to be harvested by manipulators in office: patriotism, perseverance and productivity. If you pay close attention, you can expose their phony scams for yourself. You can tune them out yourself, but still suffer their effects among others.

Riding in a group on a bikeway at night, people peeled off for home. It dwindled down to just him and his pal Hank on a fixie, who was taking advantage of his bright headlight. They pedaled increasingly hard, going side by side around 20 mph. In a flash, three hooded thugs, adults not teens, attacked, jumped over the post fence. One lunged, nearly knocking off Hank, who wobbled dangerously until righting expertly. Two on his right pummeled him with baseball bats as he uttered in unintelligible surprise. One slammed his bicep, bruising him badly and raising a nice welt. Luckily, his head was down, because the other landed directly across his helmet instead of face. Outnumbered by at least one, they weren't about to stop blind in pitch dark and take them on. And do what? Be killed or kill? Neither were attackers very effective, probably targeting what they thought was one small rider, not two heavyweights barreling headlong. First assailant bounced off but split Hank's lip. Other pair only got only one shot each. They wouldn't get another, although fading footpads followed. He told Hank, "Ride hard," and whoever else was in earshot, "We're calling the police," and it soon grew quiet again. He felt very lucky to be riding with someone equally skillful; otherwise he would've had to make a stand unarmed.

What they were waiting all night to get mystified him. Bicyclists make convenient but poor targets. He never carried money or valuables. His bike was fitted with pedals for which you need special shoes, and was too tall for most riders. Pity any bike jacker who tries jumping on only to crush some sensitive parts when feet slip right off. Likely, though, it was a gang initiation or hate crime, something inspired by playing violent games and watching hours of televised dramas. They give life sentences for hate crimes. Was such a dull thrill worth paying for with your life? Hideous idiots. How he was attired and kind of bike usually made daytime punks think he was a bike cop; had that been true, he'd be carrying a gun and nightstick. Were they crazy?

When they got to a crossing with streetlights, Hank dialed 911. He accepted cell and explained the situation. They agreed to meet police at next intersection, so as not to let assailants catch up. Had "complete streets" been available, they probably wouldn't have risked riding on a deserted bikeway at that hour. Supposedly, linear parks close at night, but neither can they enforce such an ordinance nor have curfews on thoroughfares. They arrived quickly in patrol cars but wasted precious time questioning him. "Do you want to come into station and file a report?" "No, what I want is for you catch these criminals so what happened to us doesn't

happen to someone else.” With business meetings the morning after, he didn’t notice right away how cracked helmet’s shell was or how really concussed and dizzy he felt. But it could have been much worse. Afterwards, delivered a message to advocates that they need more lights and patrols there.

Years earlier, sitting on a bench at car dealership waiting for another obligatory service check, he tried to stave off restlessness. After a 2-hour spin he returned to find chore incomplete. Instead, he quietly passed precious time focused on a vibrant October lawn tinged in red against white of showrooms, as if a Mexican flag. Then a dump truck full of Latino gardeners descended. They had a fixed but noisy routine, mowed in patterns, worked in efficient loops. They gathered debris and sustenance simultaneously. So hard when you can’t find anything to do, don’t know local language, submit to any degradation. Arty distractions weren’t an option. Their 3rd shift was eat, steal an hour of Telemundo, then sleep.

People’s dreams are fragile. He never had any such illusions; whatever he did just sank, valuable only in context, meaningless without. Could hardly explain himself except to insiders, but even then it was hard. Really, he felt he belonged in some media business creating content, perhaps constructing a new paradigm. But what paradigm? A good one, one hopes, although whatever is. Weaving dreams for people could be a form of leadership. You can’t pander to their basest instincts and promote fears, though. There’s already enough anxiety and hatred to go around many times over. Human spirit can never justify violence. Killing isn’t a normal impulse, only governments hope you won’t be too squeamish about it when they force you to. You can be unconventional for the sake of alleviating boredom. But does it matter? Is anyone paying any attention at all?

Negotiators need a manifold to assess inputs against key issues. First you have to list key issues, something usually unknown initially without brainstorming, then sort inputs based on already experienced results. An input might be, “We ought to have...” A result might be, “We tried this and it failed/succeeded.” Issues line up in middle, and inputs/results pass back and forth across. Being able to see how everything interrelates makes it easy to avoid oversights. Many 2-sided arguments exist, but seldom do partisans find common ground. Such specialization makes outsiders scratch their heads. Readers had no idea what he was talking about. His contributions were dearly missed, but only by those who no longer were employed after most were downsized along with him. If he’d only worked harder to build business, but, no, it wasn’t his fault; a policy conceived half a World away was to blame. A Swedish

billionaire named Meoff Shoring had decided without asking or knowing and forced an unprofitable exodus in which hundreds of millions in sales disappeared. Building a business is man's work, but destroying is child's play.

Getting combatants to consider each others' viewpoints is a mediator's role. Few, if anyone, relish being one. It gives you a headache, puts you in the middle, sets you up as a target of bribes or hatred, tests your integrity. Complete impartiality is almost impossible to prove; all arguments are tainted with self interest, and no side is satisfied with a decision made by someone else. Best thing a mediator can do is erase a dispute's history; keeps it manageable. Origins aren't as important as simplifying what currently exists that supports life. Stick with current priorities and you'll seldom go wrong. Drag in baggage and nobody wins. Millennia old traditions keep religious fanatics and political combatives at each others throats.

Gardeners wore heavy coats for so fine a day. You knew they left home well before dawn, probably peel off layers as sun reaches its noonday zenith, much lower now than in height of Summer. Malnourished with skinny arms, they worked around backlit trees. Couldn't tell whether trees had changed color for Fall from his angle, only their small size, because businesses plant a bit of green for an otherwise sterile, seemingly uncaring landscape devoted to commerce. Here they only did this because other, more successful competitors did. At least it made work for needy Mexicans feeding their hungry families.

A couple of color arrived amidst angry words and left the same way. Better to argue in private until that doesn't work anymore, then seek help. When you're a minority already under stress, it's even worse to know that onlookers are forming their prejudices about your race by how you act under automotive duress. But verbal abuse is still a violation not to be tolerated by bystanders. But should it be? People only snap when passionate about their relationships. Who snaps at indifferent strangers, unless they threaten? "We hurt those we love," it's said. The abused feel abandoned when abuse stops. Sick, but that's just how it is. Victims get used to worse behavior and imitate violence they've endured. This cycle built for two repeats, and nexus of victims grows, when only the slightest intervention might brush entire web away.

Gardeners are done in a jiffy; plots are as small as fees they charge. Can't waste any more space than necessary for O₂ producing vegetation when you're selling CO, CO₂, and O₃ producing vehicles. No time for admiring handiwork, workers clamber back

into dump truck along with waste buckets, and it lumbers off as if they never existed. Orphans once had mothers who loved them. Roll calendar years forward to find dealership now closed, gardeners without a client, and him not driving much. Rival dealership sells more cars without discounts, so automaker forces small competitor out of business. Consumer pays price, as always. Weeds now grow in cracks of broken asphalt expanse.

Why isn't it possible for people to get along? People don't exist alone, they extend into others: children, coworkers, friends, strangers. They're so dependent they seek to dominate those who fill their needs. They do this through guilt, manipulation, tantrums or tears. Without constant emotional and physical upkeep and continuous conversation, their imaginations go to work. Clinging intimates come to believe those who were once there for them won't be. This may end in betrayal, from which neither party benefits. People are constantly conditioned to think this way. Advertisers make people feel badly about themselves in order to coerce them to fill emptiness with something clients want to sell you: diet pills, exercise equipment, new car, outfits, things you don't really need. They align themselves with something wholesome, "Buy this fuel wasting hulk to protect your children." From what if not from deadly air pollution? Someone always profits from simple change, whether competing businesses, divorce lawyers, predators or stock brokers. A person like him would always have to keep moving because he didn't stifle himself or subserviently act like putty in hands of empire builders. Don't hang onto feelings of guilt or persecution. Confess, get absolution, or move on.

Do you think nobody is watching? Your every move in public is recorded on tape. Every email is passed around for comment. Litigious vultures are waiting for you to screw up so they can pick your bones. Insurance companies identify a new threat, then exploit it. Take identity theft; criminals discovered it's easier to fake being someone real than contrive a make-believe alias. It's all too easy over computers. After they ruin their own reputations, they continually steal another identity for another chance at doing the same. Exactly how far do you think they can get doing this? You're only liable for \$50 of fraudulent credit card debt. Your address and phone number are easy to affirm. Giving out your Social Security Number isn't a good idea, because someone could set themselves up as you in another place. But then they have to get credit cards, driver's license, and library card at a new address, so they really don't have your identity. Proves nothing at all. Many people have exactly the same name; Google your own sometimes; it's almost

guaranteed you'll find a half dozen or more of you out there with totally unlike life situations, possibly criminals under witness protection. Then again, if you want to smear individuals, you can post their picture with lies, and it'll take an act of Congress to be exonerated. Discrete individuality hardly matters. This is more a problem for creditors and insurers than individuals. But to defray their costs, insurers will sell you another policy, anything to chisel from you. Who's the criminal? Brings the whole idea of paying via credit card into question. Why take chances? He liked to use cash whenever possible. Society has arrived at a vulnerable point, where no authority or order is possible. Charlatans, cult leaders, and gangsters run everything upon evil, personal agendas. But how is that different than what was already in place? Society's collapse is cyclical, new crooks frequently replacing old ones already bloated on hours you spent putting off gratification, slaving, and watching small savings grabbed in big segments. See Big W blocked the way like VV, double nickels, pace constraint, between him and living.

Trust granted too freely to strangers leaves doors unlocked and lets bad things to happen to you. People aren't all suckers, gullible, perhaps. Just because they can't strike back immediately doesn't mean they forget or forgive. There are countless nice people forgiving many transgressions. A few privileged piggies who take advantage are your problem. You have to pick your collaborators carefully, lest they disappoint or rip you off. Yet you have to take chances or you never get anywhere. Murderers and psychopaths use dissociation from place as a weapon. People surrounded by loved ones and peer groups are better protected. Detectives look first for likely suspects among family and neighbors, rarely suspect a drifter, only when all else fails or FBI recognizes a profile. Community groups, family ties, monogamy, open communication among familiars, solid longevity, trade unions: They all build trust and become impenetrable defenses against predators. Form strong coalitions, and you can defend yourselves. Appearing alone paints a bull's-eye on your back; being associated thwarts predators. Little tykes with short legs might get left behind by big brothers, too, he knew. The price of freedom isn't just waiting and watching. It's also communicating among folks who care enough for one another to make communities better and safer. Privacy has more downside than up.

