

I Guess That's Me (A Reflection)

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Single

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Not all the pain was gone. I had lots of time to think about this failed marriage. Some people go wild when they get their first opportunity for freedom. Not only do they date (another euphemism) anything close to room temperature, many jump blindly into another binding relationship. Not me. I couldn't, in a phrase, get arrested. I tried, but every woman I met seemed to live in a separate, parallel universe. They would appear here and there but I could never keep them in front of me long enough to make a connection. It was almost as though I had a neon sign above me flashing, "Without a Clue."

Through the years Bev and I lived together without love, I didn't give a thought to what went wrong. All I knew was that it had and this relationship had to end. I lived in a shell those years, afraid to say or do anything that would make the breakup worse. (E.g., one of us goes to a lawyer and sues for divorce.) Eventually, I succeeded and she realized she needed to leave. After the divorce, I was left with the shell. Slowly it dissolved and I was able to think about what went wrong.

She was still working and living nearby. We talked occasionally. Once she made the offhand remark that I wasn't spontaneous. I didn't understand what she meant so I thought about it for quite a while. After a day or so, I

came to the conclusion she was wrong, simply flat out wrong. After a decade or so, I began to comprehend what she meant because I had missed *her* meaning.

What she saw was that I planned a great deal. She thought if you put so much effort into planning you can't be spontaneous. If you planned these things in detail, how could you be spontaneous? Spontaneous, to her, meant not planning. Now that I think about it, planning is not the right word. What I did, what I've always done, is prepare. Beyond the Boy Scout joke about being prepared (Tom Lehrer), there is a huge difference between preparing for contingencies and planning for things to go from A to B, and then to C.

Then I began to think, as I wrote this chapter, what is all this planning about? And then I remembered a discussion I had during my first year of college. Like many, I felt adrift in high school. I didn't understand the world, myself, nor how they connected. Now, from this great distance, I understand this happens when the information coming at you increases faster than your ability to process it. Part of our nature and perfectly normal. Back then I knew nothing. Typically behind in development, I was one very confused adolescent. The confusion continued as I entered college, so my father arranged for me to see an old college chum of his, a psychologist in Albany. I made the bus trip back and forth from Troy a handful of times.

The only thing worse for an adolescent is to think they do understand themselves and the world. This kind of behavior puts kids in jail. And worse. Disturbing confusion or dangerous arrogance is not much of a choice is it? Actually, there is a third, equally bad option. Make believe nothing is wrong, that you know your place in the world despite your internal confusion. The "good" teenager. This has the appearance of a safer choice. Of the other two, you can grow out of the confusion and you might survive the

arrogance. But fooling yourself into thinking everything is all right is the way to be wrong all the way to the grave.

The last time I made this trip was when he asked me, “Why do you plan?” Thinking about this question on the bus back to Troy, I felt it was, well, silly. Yes, I did plan, but what was the concern? I guess I’d read enough to see what he was looking for and it just didn’t seem important. The whole discussion—about why I was confused and why I was the way I was—seemed unimportant. I decided I didn’t need his counseling any longer. I had, belatedly, survived adolescence. Actually, my passion for preparation predates my adolescence. First, there was that Scouting experience (beginning with Cub). Then my interest in efficiency (see the “Future Me” chapter).

Now, today, I know it’s not about “planning.” What I do, is prepare for contingencies. I don’t expect anything to take place, to play out, as planned. Ever. What I do, is prepare—a lot—which does not preclude spontaneity. But I do believe that in Bev’s mind—and I say this because I don’t think she’s an exception—she saw it differently. She believed if you work hard at planning and preparing then you can’t be spontaneous. She felt you were committed to the plan. Yet, in my mind, I feel I’m more spontaneous than most *because* I’m prepared. Because I am prepared for contingencies, I believe I have more options.

How to illustrate? The other day I went for a doctor’s appointment with my briefcase containing bills to pay and a magazine I needed to read. I’m always prepared for long waits at the doctor. This time, I pull out my magazine and before I can finish a page, I’m called in. Fine. Am I disappointed I didn’t accomplish more during the expected wait? No. Is my day out of whack, because I didn’t get to use this time in the way I had prepared for? No. I gave it

no thought beyond being glad the appointment was moving swiftly. The bills and the magazine would have to wait.

Having said this, I must in good conscience address the self-evident: Am I over-prepared? (I like to think I prepare for the future, although I'm not a survivalist nor do I have a bomb shelter and six-month supply of food. But I did examine those possibilities.) Let's look at one method I use for protecting my work, i.e., my techniques for backup, specifically the backup of computer data. The recommended procedure from the world of accounting, since time immemorial, says you make three backups called respectively son, father, and grandfather. Having made these three, the next backup is placed on the grandfather diskette and it becomes the son. (And the father diskette becomes the grandfather, and the original son becomes the father.) Having explained this, is it how I backup? No way.

Here's what I do. I backup the file I'm using to write this book to my hard disk every few minutes. (I changed the standard keyboard combinations for this action so all I have to do is hit a single key—which I touch-type.) At the end of the day, I backup all the files I've worked on to an external diskette. Weekly, I backup my work files to my other computer here in my office. Every few, say six, months, I take the external diskette to my safety deposit box (removing the old one to clean it and begin the process anew). The accounting procedure makes sense for that type of data-processing; my method makes sense, to me, for what I do.

The immediate goal is to protect my work. The larger goal in backup is to protect one's time. If you only have one computer and it crashes, you'll be lucky to lose only days. Over the past six years, I've always used two computers and survived the few crashes with time losses measured in minutes. (The second computer is much older

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and slower than the one I work on daily. But it can do many of the same jobs in a pinch.) I believe backup helps us survive many contingencies. The question, rephrased, becomes: Is my level of backup excessive preparation?

A simpler example. For a recent trip, I bought a new camera. The manual said the battery should last for months, possibly dozens of rolls of film shot. It also said that if you weren't careful, didn't properly close the lens cover, the battery might discharge. I also knew battery life was a function of how long it sat on the shelf before I bought it. I purchased a backup battery at my first shopping opportunity. Could I have waited for an unexpected failure to buy a replacement battery? After all, batteries are easy to find whenever you need one. But are they really? Since this was a battery I had never used, I didn't know. (Certainly, I correctly assumed, it was less available than the ubiquitous double A.) I also realized that if I'm at a remote location taking unique pictures, I want a backup battery on hand.

The end of this story? The battery failed after a roll and a half. I put in the backup and bought another at the first opportunity. The replacement battery also failed after a roll and a half. Unexpected and inconvenient, but I lost no shots. (I took the camera back and they replaced it and the batteries. The battery in the new camera is still working.)

Having said what I think of Beverly's comment on what she perceived as one of my faults, does this mean I perceive myself without fault? Hardly. And this seems like as good a place as any to address my faults, real or perceived. This book is about reality and appearance, and faults are key to both. From this distance, I'm able to recall more faults from our marriage. I wonder, are these not quite ordinary? Are they worth this many words? But this

next fault is about too many words. Which I think I tend to use to avoid a direct statement. By not speaking plainly, I'm accused of not coming right out and saying what I mean. On the other hand, I'm not willing to figure out what people want if they won't say it. If you want something from me, you'll have to tell me in so many words. In one word, I both tend towards and dislike in others, circuitousness.

Another unrelated fault is confirmations. If I'm not sure, I don't think it hurts to ask again, to check. Some people don't like being asked more than once. Sorry, but it's my fault I wasn't sure and I didn't think it would hurt to make sure. I feel it's better to make sure than make a mistake. But trust me, most people find this annoying. Sorry, just trying to prevent a possible problem.

I also like to tease, especially those I feel are equal to the barb. I don't pick on the weak, but rather the strong who've left me an opening. Unfortunately, sometimes they misunderstand. Perhaps, it's my mistaken judgment, thinking they were strong enough. I know I tend to give people more credit than they might deserve. More leeway, if you will permit.

And more rope. I take people at their word and give them plenty of rope. On the good side, this looks like patience. Is this patience a virtue? You decide. Here's how I treat people. If they make a mistake, if they fail to deliver, I give them a chance to fix it on their own. If they don't, I'll point it out. I'll show them I'm concerned and it's their responsibility to make it right. And I don't stop there; I will most likely mention it twice, minimally, and frequently three times. Then the game changes.

Now I think I've been what I consider to be patient. If they take advantage, if they stray across the line, then I shut the door. What I don't do is get angry, don't give a clue before they step over the edge. I let them know what I want, and that they should correct this on their own. If

I have to yell at people, threaten them to get something done, then I don't need them. If they can't get it on their own, I don't want them around.

Another of my biggest faults is my inability to answer the simple question, "How are You?" I know it's simple conversation convention, a greeting with no meaning or significance. The reason I can't simply answer is that I'm never thinking about it. And there's always something wrong, and not always trivial. Many times it has taken me great pain and effort to get to the place where I'm now being asked, "How are you?" I can't answer simply, "Fine, how are you?" I can't, because it isn't true. The best I can do, is smile grimly.

Problem is, I don't do that often enough. This is me. I have to be original. I have to say something interesting or clever or at least flop on my face trying. Which is usually what happens in response to this question. Which most of my friends know, and therefore don't ask the question.

Up to the point of being asked, I wasn't thinking about how much it hurt or how much pain I was in. When asked, me like the mook I am, have to stop and think and try to truthfully answer the question. But I can't since it's rhetorical and no one needs to hear about my pain. I end up fumbling semi-coherently, something like "Well, I'm here." What in the world do they think I mean by that? I'm sure it's not what they're looking for. I stare at their disconcerted reaction and kick (mentally) myself for sounding like a jerk, trying to remember the next time to grit my teeth and grimly smile.

All of these mea culpas pale in comparison to my worst fault: I smoked cigarettes—and cigars!—for six years. Given how much I hate it now, I know there's no way I can apologize enough, even though it was only those few years. What disturbs me most is not remembering if I

was a considerate smoker. I know few people who are. Since I've known so few in my life, certainly less than ten, I have to doubt I was. Given my aversion—for how many years? twenty plus!—I've been paying overtime for my sin. Although this is payback in the extreme, I can do no more than apologize again.

Since my faults weren't finding me any women, I felt there must be some other way to approach women somewhere. I asked my friends. They offered the standard suggestions. One proposed the Personals. This was an approach I'd never considered. Until the marriage, I never had any problems meeting women. Not that they were crawling all over me. Often, I was too busy to make a serious social effort. But when I did, I always met people. Now I needed a new method. Or so I thought.

OK, how would I do a Personal? I studied the possibilities, detailed the options. Should I mention I was not a regular to Personals? Could I describe myself as a mental adventurer? Sidestep the arthritis issue? No. Perhaps mention travel? Looking for June to September excursions? And the divorce, what to say about *that*? If I revealed my attitude on marriage by saying "Never Again," would that be too Jewish a reference? How about humor, a chromosome joke to indicate sex? Or use the symbols, "My arrow is up, hard, and seeking. Is your cross down, wet, and waiting?"

I could I be brief: "Personal: Hip Het with Hurt Hip seeks Safe Liaison." I could be comprehensive and still be clever: "Holmes seeks Watson. Object: Giants. Neither want nor expect second fiddle. In no hurry for photo, drinks, or casual sex. (These days sex is too causal.) Do looks count? Let's count to six and play prisoner. (I am not a number, I am a free man.) Speaking of numbers, how about counting Ninjas? As in Ninjas, piñatas, and

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Mongo Santa Marias? Summer travel plans include a computer conference, a Formula One race, and a tour of Midwestern Frank Lloyd Wright buildings. Not a regular to Personals, I am physically cautious, mentally adventurous.”

Wow, that really covers it. Maybe I should say more about sex? “Take a chance with your mind. Safe sex? Hell, safety in anything physical.” Have I sufficiently promoted freedom of thought? Made it plain I’d enjoy someone smarter than me? That my goal is complete physical safety and complete mental liberation. That before sex, we should see if we can communicate. And should I mention the future? How about “Let’s try counting down to the millennium together.” And what about music: from Birdland to Baracocco? Electronically Eclectic? Could I use catholic with the small “c”? How many of these references can I use without being too obscure? And what about my favorite, cummings (another small “c”)? Some scientific reference? Computers?

I didn’t place a personal ad. I did, somehow, again become visible to women. Yet I never seemed, as we euphemistically say, to do as well as I had before marriage. The reason is quite simple: I was busier than I had been before. Not necessarily doing that much more, but my increasing disability and lack of a helpmate gave me less time. And more time to think about what kind of woman I was seeking.

In the tradition honored by time, I made lists of my top ten attractors and repellers. (The order is only generally significant.)

Top Ten Attractors
Laughter
Wit
Smile

Eyes
Proportion
Originality
Integrity
Competence
Style
Freedom

Top Ten Repellers
Smoking
Lying
Artificiality
Conformity
Asexuality
Slovenliness
Obesity
Incommunicativeness
Secretiveness
Fanaticism

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