SPOTLIGHT

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Please Close the Door!

One afternoon as I was driving down Bunker Hill Street back toward Somerville, I saw a guy at the Sullivan Square rotary waving for a cab. It was odd that he was standing where he was. There was really no place there for a pedestrian so he looked weird, but not dangerous. But we do weird and we don’t do dangerous so I picked him up.

I knew immediately that this guy had been up for at least five days. He was paranoid, talking to himself and repeatedly looking over his shoulder. “Where you going?” I asked. He continued to mumble to himself but pointed towards Rte. 99 to Everett. As I swung around the rotary, all I wanted was to get this guy out of my cab. I would get my wish sooner than I thought.

It was rush hour and the radio crackled continuously, the dispatcher calling for free cabs. As I drove up 99 toward the drawbridge that spans the Mystic River my customer says “let me out here, let me out here.” OK” I answer with relief and begin to slow down and pull over.

“I’m looking over my own shoulder now and I see his door open and his right foot sticking out of the cab! “Shut the door, please close the door. Let me pull over first!” I plead, but to no avail. “Oh no” I cry as he rolls out of the cab. Baboomp, I hit a bump and the bump turns out to be his shoulder. He jumps up and cries out in pain “Ohhhhh, you ran over my shoulder!” I grab the mike, “let me call it in”. Of course, he sees the mike and paranoid as he is, he bolts into oncoming traffic. “Ok, forget this, I’m outta here”, I decide as I bang a U turn, and head back to Sullivan where the dispatcher is still calling for cabs.

“i’m at Sullivan, 22.”

“22, get 34 Trenton in Charlestown.”

Where is it going, of course? Everett.

I grab my fare and we head back up 99 toward the bridge and I wonder out loud, as if I didn’t know, “What’s this traffic all about?” Up ahead I can see my guy standing in front of a bus, gesturing wildly at the driver. As I crawled along, I saw the flashing red lights of an ambulance heading towards the scene.

“Thank God,” I thought. He would get the help he needs. Problem solved. Happy ending. I went back to work.
PEONY

LOTUS

CAT
Facts, Values, and the "Objective" World
Tim Snow

In the book Sapiens, Yuval Noah Harari makes the startling claim that "principles of justice... have no objective validity." He then proceeds to “translate” the first sentence of the Declaration of Independence into biology, implying that 1) biology is more real than ethics; 2) biology wouldn’t make the same claims as the Declaration does, and that 3) the human rights described in the Declaration are myths or fictions created by human beings to maintain social order, no better than the Code of Hammurabi. This is an example of what philosophers call the fact\value distinction, the view that facts and values are two very different kinds of things: the one real and objective, able to be investigated by science; and the other subjective, mere fictions, made up by humans and posited onto the world by us.

Reading Harari’s book prompted me to take a year-long philosophical journey, exploring subjectivity and objectivity in different areas of thought, which culminated in a class at Tufts, generously paid for through the OLLI Scholars Initiative program, on the Problem of “The World”: the problem of whether the world can be objectively understood apart from our own human point of view. In this essay, I’ll attempt to briefly explain how my journey has unfolded.

The fact\value distinction is specifically concerned with subjectivity and objectivity in the realm of ethics, but the subjective\objective distinction appears in other areas as well. In fact, Harari extends subjectivity to nations and corporations as well as gods and ethical systems. He has a long example of how the Peugeot corporation is a fictional entity, not equivalent to its vehicles, employees, or factories. Each of these could disappear, he says, but the Peugeot company would not. So in what sense does it really exist? According to Harari, “Peugeot is a figment of our collective imagination... It can’t be pointed at; it is not a physical object. But it exists as a legal entity.” There are many of these types of fictions according to Harari. “Sapiens have thus been living in a dual reality. On the one hand, the objective reality of rivers, trees and lions; and on the other hand, the imagined reality of gods, nations and corporations.”

Harari uses this idea to make a point about history and how humans were able to organize and exert power. But as a philosopher, this prompted me to dig into the metaphysical point. Are there two different kinds of reality, subjective and objective, and are important facts like those of ethics or the legal system somehow less “real” than the facts of biology or physics? And if so, does that mean they are arbitrary: one ethical or legal system being no better than another?
The first thing to note is that Harari makes the dividing line between facts and fiction at a precarious point. Corporations and nations are abstractions, but so are rivers and forests. A river is just a collection of water and a forest a collection of trees. The trees that make up the Black Forest have disappeared and been replaced by new ones many times, but the Black Forest remains. So is that just a fiction as well? It seems difficult to hold the dividing line between corporations and nations on the one hand, and forests and rivers on the other. Both are collections of things, gathered together and labeled by humans.

And once we see that, the slope gets ever more slippery. The trees themselves are mere collections of things that humans (or conscious beings) have gathered together and labelled. A tree is a collection of bark, branches, roots. Or to use a famous example from W.V.O. Quine, one of the twentieth century’s most eminent philosophers, when I am translating a foreign language and I hear someone point to a rabbit and say “Gavagai”, how do I know that it refers to a rabbit and not “undetached rabbit parts” or “manifestation of the universal rabbithood.” It seems like the grouping is imposed by us, not by the world.

Harari’s labelling corporations as “myths” reminded me of one of my favorite quotes from Quine:

*I continue to think of the conceptual scheme of science as a tool, ultimately, for predicting future experience in the light of past experience. Physical objects are conceptually imported into the situation as convenient intermediaries - not by definition in terms of experience, but simply as irreducible posits comparable, epistemologically, to the gods of Homer. For my part I do, qua lay physicist, believe in physical objects and not in Homer’s gods... But in point of epistemological footing the physical objects and the gods differ only in degree and not in kind... The myth of physical objects is epistemologically superior to most in that it has proved more efficacious than other myths as a device for working a manageable structure into the flux of experience.*

Quine is here agreeing with Harari that gods and nations and corporations are posits, but he pushes this much further, arguing that so too are ordinary objects! So biology or physics are “better” than the gods of Homer not because they are different in kind, but only because they provide a simpler explanation of more phenomena. But either way, they are convenient “myths” we place upon the world to explain it.
And, though Quine was no Kantian, his quote may remind us of Immanuel Kant’s “Copernican Revolution” in our understanding of the world and its relation to us: “...as regards the (experience) of objects ... either I must assume that the concepts ... conform to the object, or else I assume that the objects ... conform to the concepts.” As Kant sees it, the former leads to dead ends, so he pursues the latter, arguing that our concepts of space and time, and cause and effect, come from within us; they aren’t reflections of the way the world is “out there”, independently of our conception of it. Or, as Ludwig Wittgenstein, puts it: “One thinks that one is tracing nature over and over again, and one is merely tracing round the frame through which we look at it.”

This might seem crazy at first. For most of my life, I thought it was. But, over thirty years, chinks in my realist armor have been forming. First of all, as Kant argued, we could never know how things are “in themselves”, independently of us, because we can only experience them as they appear to us, from behind a “veil of perception”. There’s no way to get around it and look at it from a God’s eye point of view. But furthermore there is reason to believe that our minds influence our perceptions. Putting aside Kant’s specific views of space and time (for which Einstein’s theories and non-Euclidean geometries cause problems), psychology gives us reason to believe that our concepts can affect our experience of the world, that our perception involves “top-down” processing. Take the famous duck-rabbit, for example:

![Duck-Rabbit Image]

You can either see it as a duck or a rabbit, but not both. And presumably if you have no idea what a rabbit is, you couldn’t see it as such and would see only a duck.
Similarly, experiments have been done on this set of figures:

If subjects are shown the unambiguous Man before the ambiguous Man-Rat in the middle, they are much more likely to see it as a man; however, the reverse is true of those shown the unambiguous Rat first. This seems to show that our expectations affect what we see. There’s controversy about exactly how to interpret this, but whatever is going on here, it begins to shake the standard empiricist picture that our perceptions are purely passive reflections of a mind-independent, objective world.

So what does all this have to do with the fact/value distinction? Currently, both sides of the debate seem to concede that the only way to deny that there is a distinction between facts and values is by showing that ethical rules live outside of us in some objective realm -- that there’s some existence of values wholly independent of the way in which we experience them. This means that defenders of the objectivity of ethics tend to try and make it more scientific, essentially turning it into a field akin to sociology. In other words, they try to collapse the fact/value distinction by saying values are more like facts. But what if instead of pushing values to be more like facts, we turn this around and consider whether, and how much, facts are like values. Ethics and values seem to be highly dependent on us and couldn’t possibly be a purely "objective" reflection of what the world would be like in our absence. In some sense, values are a projection of our interests onto the world. But it turns out this might not be so different from science. If we follow Kant, we find that science may be less "objective" than we ordinarily think.

That being said, however, I still think there’s something to the idea that science and ethics have a fundamental difference. What it amounts to, I think, is this: ethics is fundamentally normative; whereas science is descriptive. Ethics tries to tell us how the world ought to be; whereas science tries to describe the world as it is, and this holds even if we concede all we know of the world is intermixed with our own conceptual contributions. This is what, at bottom, bothers me so much about meta-ethical theories that seem to turn ethics into a branch of sociology. You can’t do ethics by just doing sociology; it is more than that. Ethics tells us how societies should be, not just how they are. But my point in this essay is that this shouldn’t necessarily lead us to worry that ethics is somehow less "objective" than science. Defenders of the fact/value distinction are concerned that normative imperatives can’t possibly be found in a colorless, odorless, non-teleological world of things-in-themselves. But, if the Kantian line I have been pushing is right, neither can science.
When I was born, some kind fairy gave my parents a board painted with the letters of the alphabet to hang over my crib. I learned very early that my father and mother were anxious to hear me say the names of these shapes in the proper order, but these pretty painted designs had nothing to say to me. I couldn’t recite the alphabet until my mother sang it to me in a rhyming song that any child could learn. I think my father soon got used to the idea that he had not produced a prodigy, but my mother persevered.

I have a photograph of three-year-old me sitting in front of a Christmas tree, next to a large alphabet book that has been propped open beside me. The letters in that book were more interesting than the alphabet board because they were illustrated with pictures, but the book had no stories to tell. Verses about the the quirky characters in The Real Mother Goose, which my mother read to me at bedtime, were far more beguiling.

I don’t remember being attracted to letters as letters, until my mother added Campbell’s Alphabet Soup to our lunch menu. This magic red broth was filled with tiny square vegetables and soft little noodles shaped like letters. I searched every spoonful I took from my bowl for the letters of my name and placed M, A, R, Y in proper order on the rim of my dish over and over again.

When I tired of this, there was a payoff. I could finish the soup and see the pictures of bunnies painted on the bottom of the bowl — always there, just as I expected.

My mother was not content to watch me push ready-made letters around. She was eager for me to write my name before I started Kindergarten. When I sat at my own little table in the kitchen with a Crayola in my hand, I could form each letter of the alphabet separately, following the samples she wrote for me on lined paper. Still, I resisted taking the step we both knew I was ready to take.

I will never understand what kept me from performing that simple task or what inspired my mother to offer me a bribe for the first word I would write. I remember the quarter she took from her purse — the biggest coin I had ever seen — and I remember how quickly I was able to to write the letters of my name in proper position on the paper under my hand. I even remember the triumphant walk we took that afternoon, three blocks to the Five and Dime store, where I was allowed to translate my quarter into a glamorous blue-and-silver bottle of Evening in Paris perfume.
I have often marveled at the energy my mother expended in bringing me to the brink of literacy, and I have wondered why she did not try to teach me to read. She left it to the experts at school to show me how all the letters in the alphabet cried out to become combinations — over and over again. I do remember the exciting day when I stood in our tiny suburban bathroom, washing before dinner, and read on the water taps H, O, T, hot; C, O, L, D, cold, and felt the proof of those words rushing over my hands. I ran downstairs to inform my parents about the message I had received from these ordinary fixtures. They behaved as if they knew about this already. Much later, I learned that I was not the only child ever to have such an epiphany.

Sometime during my first years in school, I discovered that the strange thickets of words on the pages of books I loved to hear read aloud could be penetrated by a curious child. I began to move through these magic hedges on my own into countless imaginary worlds. When I acquired this power, I was able to survive any attack or snub from a classmate and to endure the many childhood illnesses I was prone to — snuggled under the covers in my fourposter bed, ranging in Dakota Territory or the Land of OZ. When my mother brought me a cup of soothing soup, she couldn’t always rouse me to a pleasant “thank you.” She and my father began to worry that I was reading too much; they didn’t always like to have me so far away, lost in a book.
My Meteorologist
Irene Hannigan

Bob and I have had breakfast, read a section each of the NYTimes, and watched the BBC together. We are officially ready to begin another pandemic day. He knows that I will now put away my knitting project in the tote bag I keep next to the couch. I know that he will reach for the iPad he keeps next to his favorite chair and open it to the weather channel. I also know that he will give me an update on the weather, whether or not I ask for it, so I wait for his broadcast before heading upstairs to take a shower. “It’s going to be in the seventies,” he announces, “just like yesterday.”

I don’t say anything because I know there’s more to come. I have to admit I have come to rely on his weather report so I can make an informed choice about my attire for the day, but it can also be a bit irritating. I’m puzzled that he continues to be so confident in his weather app even though there have been many times this summer, especially before planned cookouts, when we’ve been grilling in the rain. Today, I don’t remind him of that fact and instead smile at this man who I am lucky to wake up with every morning and fall asleep with every night.

“Looks like it going to rain today too,” he continues as he proceeds to read the percentage of precipitation hour by hour. “A lot more rain this afternoon but tomorrow is going to be warmer and partly cloudy.”

“That’s good news,” I say adding, what he would consider to be my predictable comment. “Partly cloudy also means partly sunny,” He would tell me that I am an optimist.

I can now tell that he’s fixated on the radar and is about to ask me if I want to see when the rain will be moving into “Sutherland Woods” a conservation area in our neighborhood which borders Arlington Heights. He maintains that this is the more exact location for the weather app as opposed to Lexington which is actually our mailing address.

Sure enough I’m right. After all, we have been living in close proximity for the last six months. After nearly fifty years of marriage, I thought I knew most of Bob’s idiosyncrasies but this is a new one.

I look over his shoulder and spot the various green shaded shapes moving across the map punctuated with occasional ovals of yellow and tan.
How do you know what all that movement means?” I ask. After all, he’s an historian by profession, not a meteorologist.

“And what about all those colors?” I wondered aloud but he’s about to point out something else he thinks I might like to know.

“See that red dot?” he says. I didn’t have the heart to tell him that I hadn’t noticed so I put on my glasses for a better look.

“That’s where we are.” He then points to the key, in the lower left hand corner of the screen. He explains that the key indicates the number of inches of precipitation. Light green means none and the darker shades of green mean .05 and .1 inches respectively.

“Wow!” I said, “Red is 2 inches and purple is 32 inches!”

“But how does all that movement really help you know when it’s going to be raining?” I asked but he’s one step ahead of me.

“You see that little round circle, with two black lines, in the upper left hand corner of the screen?”

“Now that you mention it — Yes, I do see it,” I said.

“And see the times listed?”

“Yes,” I said. “I also notice the way the circle is being outlined in blue again and again.”

“That’s right,” he said, “and do you see how the time changes in fifteen minute intervals? That’s how I know how the rain is progressing over our area.”

“It sure seems a whole lot easier to just look at the percentages listed on the chart,” I said.

“So is that what you do?” Bob asks me. I am surprised that he thinks that I ever consult the weather app that he graciously downloaded on my iPad.

“Sometimes,” I reply. “But you know me, I just tend to look out the window and take my umbrella just in case. Besides, I have you,” I said as gave him a kiss on his forehead.

“So what are you doing today?” Bob asks me as puts away his iPad.

“Well, today is Wednesday so I’m meeting my drawing group. We haven’t really been drawing very much this summer, but now that we can meet outside, it’s still nice to just talk.”

“But what about the weather? Didn’t we just look at the radar?”

“Well, it’s not raining now,” I said, “and I don’t want to be the one who cancels. I’ll just take my umbrella. If it’s a light rain we’ll be fine and if it rains harder I’ll come home.”

Predictably, Roberta, Caroline and I all arrived at our agreed upon time with our masks and umbrellas and gathered around the round table on the patio outside the Community Center. We fondly remembered the many Wednesdays, before the pandemic, when we would spend a half hour talking and another hour and a half drawing. Today we just chatted, and when a light drizzle started, we put up our umbrellas and kept chatting. When the rain grew heavier, we all knew it was time to call it a day.
Bob Avallone

Flowers
Life as we knew it is over — at least for the next few weeks.

This was the first sentence in my March 15, 2020 journal entry in what happened to be the start of a new journal. Several months ago when I impulsively purchased it from an artist at a craft fair, I wondered when I’d use it. Unlike the simple spiral bound journals, to which I am generally drawn, this one seemed quite out of character for me. Perhaps I considered it only fitting that, with its cheerful yellow batik-like cover and hand-stitched blank pages, it would be a perfect choice to see me through this incongruous time. I was right.

I have, in fact, maintained a journal writing practice for well over forty years. While each one has served a different purpose, depending upon my need to write, a notebook of some sort has always been my silent stable companion. Always available at moment’s notice, to listen without interrupting to my rambling recollections and random reflections I need only to uphold my end of the conversation, which, for me, takes the form of periodic uncensored “free writes.” It is also a place where I store an eclectic collection of the quotes and poetry of others whose words resonate with me.

In recent years my journal has also been the repository for quick pen and ink sketches and “word photos” that capture my thoughts and impressions. What I wasn’t prepared for during the month of March was how often I would make an entry and how all of my entries would focus on how I was dealing with life during this unprecedented time in recent history. My March 18th word photo entitled Fruit Bowl on our Kitchen Counter was revealing.  
The fruit bowl was filled with eight bananas, five apples, and two oranges. Bob starts peeling the Chiquita labels he hates off the bananas as he tells me about his failure to connect of his first Zoom class. I unconsciously join him peeling off the labels on the Gala apples. He smiles at me and says, “What we have control over.” I say, “We can work on the price tags on the wine bottles next.”

A few days later, Bob’s Suffolk classes via Zoom were proceeding with relatively few glitches. However, while we might have taken the price off a bottle of wine or two or three it was not because we were having dinner with friends. Since mid-March it’s always dinner for two at our own dining room.

Forefront in my mind during the first few days of March was how to develop strategies and routines to help me
cope with this crisis. In addition to free writes, word photos, and pen and ink sketches, I also made lists such as the following one on March 21 based on tips from *The New York Times*

--Have a structure to your day.
--Get dressed and look good.
--Don’t binge watch TV.
--Eat regular meals.
--Count your blessings.
--Take a walk.
--WASH HANDS...WASH HANDS ... WASH HANDS
--Find indoor “amusements” – board games, jigsaw puzzles, crossword puzzles, and other hobbies

Despite my best efforts to have a reasonable structure to each day, it was still a challenge to keep track of what day it was as revealed in my March 24 free write entry.

*When will it finally occur to me that I’m not going anywhere? Today I have a writing group meeting and when I woke up I thought I’d be heading to the LCC even though I should have remembered we’d scheduled a ZOOM meeting. After taking a shower, I even picked out a sweater that would be presentable (purple one with the quilt pin) before I realized I could attend the meeting in my bathrobe and no one would know.*

Another word photo entry on April 18 entitled A Snowy Saturday reinforced the challenge of keeping track of time.

*The forsythia is laden with snow this morning and our picnic table is covered with at least three or four inches. Now in addition to not quite knowing what day it is, it’s going to be hard to remember what season it is especially since Bob started whistling “Winter Wonderland” as he was making his coffee.*

If there is a slight silver lining to this “new life” it is the fact that I have been much more open to, and in fact thankful for, the various ways that technology has allowed us to keep in touch with family and friends.

*I am getting to be a fan of Face Time! We check in regularly with Ted and Shannon and their little pup Gardy. Yesterday we had coffee with Betsy and Drew at 1 pm after our Sunday morning brunch of waffles and sausages. (that’s how we knew it was Sunday) At 7:30 we met with Tom and Maxine in San Diego for wine and then there’s Zoom! It’s hard to believe that we boomers have become zoomers.*

And finally this David Hollis quote found its way into my journal for safe-keeping and sums up how I am feeling as April nears its end —*“In the rush to return to normal, use this time to consider which parts are worth rushing back to.”*
Mowing the Lawn in Maine
Carol Agate

In August of 1998 the small town of Newport, Maine, found itself in the center of an issue of national concern. After Shirley Davis injured her back she could no longer ride her lawnmower and called on her daughters for help. One daughter, in her 30s, did the mowing for several years. She did not want her mowing responsibilities to ruin her perfect line-free suntan.

A neighbor spotted her riding the mower without any covering above her waist and filed a complaint of public indecency with the police. She said she was concerned about this distraction to motorists. She claimed she saw one car go into the ditch. It seemed strange that motorists would be distracted because Davis had surrounded her property with hedges in order to block her view of the abandoned cars the neighbor refused to remove from her property.

The police came, and didn't know what to do. The matter was bumped up to the town manager, who concluded no laws had been broken. Davis' daughter had the right to be topless on private property. The law prohibited only the exhibition of genitalia or sex acts committed in public. The manager reported to the town board: "Female breasts are not genitalia, and mowing the lawn is not a sex act."

The matter didn't end there because the press had too much fun with it. The discussion spread beyond Newport, being reported on CNN and radio stations across the country. Newport residents were besieged by calls from friends and relatives around the country asking for the lowdown. The town manager was interviewed by reporters and talk show hosts. He commented, "It's not what I would have chosen the town be known for, but I'd rather have it something quirky like this, than something negative."

Davis had as much fun with it as did the press. Her daughter, one of four, did not want to be identified. Davis let the reporters know she approved, telling them, "If I had her body, I'd mow the lawn topless, too." Her anonymous daughter pointed out that the targets of the controversy are actually rather tiny. She said, "I waited for years to develop breasts," she said. "And I'm still waiting."

The publicity helped all the neighbors. The one who complained put "for sale" signs on some of her junk cars. Other neighbors held yard sales.

At its next meeting the town board discussed whether an ordinance should be passed to prohibit bare-chested women from being in public view. It was unanimously decided that no new laws were needed.
Davis was convinced that the neighbor – after three years of her daughter mowing the lawn in the same attire – complained only in retaliation for her own complaints about the neighbor’s junk cars and unlicensed dog that kept getting loose.

The unfriendly neighbor was not going to let the matter drop. She said she was fighting to protect the innocence of her four-year-old grandson and other children in the area. She initiated a petition drive to ban baring breasts in view of the public. She decided she was not only concerned about glimpses motorists might get through the hedges, but was also worried about the health and development of children who might see the “topless lawn mower,” as the unidentified daughter had come to be called.

The petition gathered enough signatures for the issue to be on the Newport ballot in November. Davis received calls of support from as far away as Australia. She was interviewed for "60 Minutes" and several other television programs, including one called "Neighbors from Hell." She answered questions for a talk-radio program airing in San Francisco, and appeared on the Howard Stern radio show in early December. She also hosted a German television crew.

The resolution was worded to prohibit "the display of female breasts in public or on private property visible from a public way." It was defeated by a landslide: 775 to 283. One voter explained her concern about the unintended consequences if gender equality should be required. She said: "My husband mows our lawn and he does want the right to take his shirt off."

Davis was satisfied with one result of the protest. The neighbor finally licensed her dog. Whether she ever removed the abandoned cars was not reported.

Residents of Newport started touting their town as the topless capital of the world. For most of the residents, it was all good fun. The people involved – except possibly the neighbor – enjoyed their 15 minutes of fame. But the incident does dramatically illustrate how absurd it is that our laws and our society would even consider this to be an issue.

As the resident concerned about her husband recognized, if men had to wear shirts they would refuse. Most women have not protested. Like Shirley Davis, they feel they are too old. Something is wrong with old breasts – or any breasts that don't meet the standards of Playboy. Imagine a man covering up on the beach because his chest was too hairy or completely hairless, or his pects undeveloped, or his breasts too pendulous. They let it hang out there, and women won't do the same – even in New York, where bare female chests are allowed – until society says the most important thing about a woman is not whether she fits the idealized image. And that won’t happen until women’s breasts of all sizes and shapes are seen in the same places we see men's breasts of all sizes and shapes.
An Excerpt from *Robes*:
A Novel by Tim O’Leary

On the morning of the last day of his life, the Honorable Robert Charles Bartoni, Justice of the Massachusetts Superior Court, stood barefoot in plaid pajamas in front of the full-length mirror attached to the door of his bedroom closet. He stared at his image, his eyes focused on the growing baldness, made worse by his unkempt bedhead. He had awoken early. Unable to recapture sleep, he decided his Saturday morning power walk would be earlier than usual. He reached into the closet and retrieved a pair of sweat pants and a maroon Harvard University wind breaker.

Bartoni enjoyed the limelight. Always available to the media and eager to offer his opinion on whatever had captured their attention, Bartoni was a media star. Two years from the mandatory retirement age for judges, Bartoni dreamed of a second career in television, a legal analyst, perhaps a cable show. He joined a private health club and gym as part of this career plan. He arranged to have the monthly billing sent to a post office box to avoid the curiosity of his wife. By prepaying the annual fee for the box, he avoided further scrutiny. Bartoni was secretly saving for a hair transplant.

An hour later, Bartoni sat in the swivel chair in his study and watched the dust motes floating in the elongated sphere of mid-April sunlight slanted across his mahogany desk and three newspapers. He poured coffee from a pewter container into a large white cup emblazoned with the seal of Harvard University.

He decided against breakfast. “Three pounds since last Saturday,” he muttered. The new digital scale angered him. Too precise. Bartoni decided to look for an old fashioned scale with a stationary needle over a rolling measure wheel. He would bring it to the courthouse and move the weekly weigh-in to Friday afternoon. More visits to the gym were in order. He wrote the word "scale" on a piece of yellow, legal-size paper and tore it from the pad.

These decisions pleased Bartoni. He smiled and added three packets of sugar to his coffee. He walked to the foyer and put the piece of paper into his briefcase. A muted knock on the front door caught his attention.

"Jesus, on a Saturday," Bartoni said. He dropped his cross pen into an outside pocket of the briefcase, unchained and unbolted the door. He forced a smile to greet this unwelcome disturbance and pulled the door back into his foyer. A man in a white shirt, red tie and a dark suit stood on the other side of the screen door. He held a briefcase. It seemed to Bartoni his features were distorted by the screen. "Whadyawant?" he barked.

The bullet went through the screen and hit Bartoni in the center of his forehead. He stumbled back, knees buckling. A second bullet whispered into his stomach. Bartoni collapsed to the floor, his mouth spewing blood onto the wide oak planks of the foyer floor.

He died with his eyes open.
During my year of graduate study in London, 1967-1968, I had made many friends, and tasted most of the cultural delights the city offered. This would be our chance to introduce our son to a wider world. So in December of 1983 just in time for Christmas, we...
The year 1984, for the United Kingdom, seemed to be the fulfillment of the direst predictions in George Orwell’s novel. A single-minded leader (Margaret Thatcher) seemed to be waging war on her own citizens (the unions). Even though dissent in Thatcher’s time was technically allowed, her relentless pressure to break the coal miners’ strike created an atmosphere of tension and despair that pervaded the country.

That was our year to be in England.

The trustees of Brooks School, after eleven years of Peter’s and my residence in the headmaster’s big white farmhouse at the center of the campus, decided that we deserved a sabbatical. We had lived through a lot of change in that time, climaxing in the highly successful transition to co-education. The job had certainly taken its toll on our energies, and for me, on my health. Even more importantly, our two boys Alex (10) and James (4) had never known what it was like to have normal weekends, and parents that didn’t always have meetings at night. So when the trustees offered us the chance to take a year off, it felt like a godsend to our family. The plan emerged that we would leave in the middle of one year, and return in the middle of the next, so that our absence would not be felt so completely by the incoming students in either of those two years. The assistant headmaster was primed to step in for the year.

We didn’t have to think very hard to decide that we would go to live in the UK for the year. Peter’s parents and sisters lived there, as did my father’s sister Joan, married to an Englishman, and my three cousins, Sally, Joanna and Andrew. During my year of graduate study in London, 1967-1968, I had made many friends, and tasted most of the cultural delights the city offered. This would be our chance to introduce our sons to a wider world.

So, in December of 1983, just in time for Christmas, we boarded the flight to London, accompanied by two large boxes containing one of the very first Wang desktop computers. We were soon settled in a row house in Oxford, where Peter planned to continue the doctoral program he had started at Harvard. Alex was enrolled in the Dragon School, which sent many graduates to Eton, and James in the Squirrel School, a friendly pre-kindergarten. The boys decided we should open a pub called The Dragon and the Squirrel!

As 1984 dawned, we plunged into our new scene with great vigor. After so many years of academic focus, I was eager to try new areas. I found a local photographer who had converted his barn into a darkroom area, with a number of stalls containing developers, and down the middle of the barn, a long sink with pans containing the necessary chemicals. You could rent a stall by the hour, and get some coaching as well. In these days of digital cameras, the concept of a darkroom is very dated, but in 1984 it turned what had been an interest, taking pictures of people, into a new passion. It always seemed magical that you could drop a
I had excellent company in many of my adventures. A Brooks parent had introduced us to the Dixons, a friendly Oxford family with similarly-aged children. Carolyn, their mother, became a lifelong friend, and shared my curiosity. We signed up for courses in drawing and went to lectures at the Ashmolean, Oxford’s art museum. We set out to sample every local pub’s Ploughman’s Lunch (traditionally, a hunk of fresh bread, a wedge of cheese, and some pickled onion), along with the various brands of local cider (the British version is alcoholic). We went to local historical sights and toured country houses. We gathered our flock of children for expeditions to hear “The Magic Flute,” or up to London for a Christmas pantomime. We borrowed a house in Wales for a weekend of mountain walking.

Our family also blended happily with those of my two married cousins, Sally and Joanna. Sally, married to Edward Baldwin, lived in a large rambling house outside Oxford, filled with three lively boys. Their Guy Fawkes party in November featured a large bonfire that the kids loved. Joanna, married to John Selborne, lived in the countryside of Hampshire with three sons and a daughter, my god-daughter. Their estate produced a large proportion of the English apples sold around the world. Both these young women had featured hugely in my post-graduate year in the UK, and Sally had introduced me to Peter. They were the closest I would ever have to sisters, and enormous generous in folding me and my family into their lives. Sally, sadly, died in 2002, and I gave her eulogy in the University Church in Oxford. Joanna and I remain close to this day.

But back to the memorable year of 1984. Over the course of the year, as we delighted in the freedom and stimulation we were discovering, and as we drove around Europe with our kids in the back of a Volvo station wagon, the atmosphere in the United Kingdom became more bleak. The spring was slow in coming, and under those gray skies, the miners and the Prime Minister dug into their respective positions. It was a monumental contest of wills, and the demonstrations were often violent. In September, the nation was happily distracted by the birth of Prince Harry, but the mood was still tense.

Another ongoing challenge Mrs. Thatcher had to deal with was the continuing threat of the IRA, the Irish Republican Army, who used terrorist attacks to pressure the British government to leave Northern Ireland. Mrs. Thatcher narrowly escaped assassination after a huge IRA bomb went off in mid-October at the Brighton hotel where her Conservative party had gathered its leaders for a convention. Five people were killed, including one of her closest advisers, and thirty-one injured. Security nationwide was now on high alert.

In early November, The Queen was scheduled for the traditional opening of Parliament. In the best British tradition, the entire affair is full of quirky traditions to remind us all of important events from the past. The Queen is driven from Buckingham Palace to Westminster in the Diamond Jubilee state coach, along a route lined by British soldiers. On her arrival, the Union Jack is lowered, and
the Royal Standard is raised over the Houses of Parliament. Once inside, she proceeds to the robing chamber, where she dons the Parliament Robe of State, and the Imperial State Crown. Accompanied by Prince Philip, and preceded by the Lord Chamberlain carrying a White Rod aloft, and a member of the House of Lords carrying the Great Sword of State, she enters the chamber and ascends the steps to the throne. After sitting, she declares in a loud voice, "My Lords, pray be seated."

At that point, The Lord Chamberlain nods to another official known as the Black Rod, whose job is to summon the House of Commons. Marching across the Central Lobby that links the two Houses, the Black Rod finds that the door to the chamber has been closed, a symbol of the Commons’ resistance to Charles I, whom they executed in 1649. The Black Rod bangs on the door with his staff, is allowed entrance and delivers the Queen’s invitation to come to the Lords to hear her speech. The sergeant-at-arms picks up the large ceremonial mace and leads the procession across the Central Lobby and into the House of Lords, followed by the Prime Minister, her cabinet, and all the other members of Parliament. When they have arrived, the Queen reads a speech prepared for her by the current government, outlining their legislative plans for the forthcoming year.

My cousin Joanna’s husband John, as a peer of the realm, had two tickets to offer friends or family to observe the ceremonial procession. He is very family-minded, and knew how much I enjoyed the ceremonial aspects of monarchy. One day, he sent me a large gold-edged card announcing that as the guest of the Earl of Selborne, I was permitted to stand in the Central Lobby between the two houses of Parliament, and witness the procession. I was thrilled, and planned a morning of Christmas shopping before I was due to show up at Westminster at noon.

On the morning news, as I prepared to catch the train from Oxford to London, I heard that London, in the wake of the Brighton bombing, had never been more carefully guarded, with sharpshooters all around the Parliament buildings. I didn’t see any when I arrived at Westminster, but presented myself, with the magic gold card, at the appointed door. I was carrying about four shopping bags, and my first surprise was that the guard who looked at my card had no interest in what might be in them. He motioned me into what felt like a long corridor, with red velvet ropes along both sides, behind which onlookers could stand. There weren’t more than twenty people there, besides me. Soon we heard a rustling of excitement, and a distant sound of conversation, coming closer and closer.

Leaning over the velvet ropes, we looked down the corridor and saw a ragged procession slowly coming our way. It was led by the huge mace, which looked like a five-foot club, with a crown on top, covered in gold. Nearer and nearer they came, this government that had divided the country, now looking like a collection of portly squires led by one woman. She, Mrs. Thatcher, projected dignity and elegance, turning her head from side to side with a slight smile. Her step was slow but firm, in keeping with the solemnity of the ancient ritual. The mace came closer and closer, Mrs. Thatcher right behind. I realized, as she approached me, that despite all the disruptions, I had great respect for this woman whose iron will had transformed the country.
In an American ceremony, I would have been tempted to applaud or cheer. Those responses felt totally inappropriate in the setting of the Central Lobby, but I did want to show her my appreciation.

When she was about three feet away, her eyes locked on mine, and in a fraction of a second, my body took over and responded with a sudden lifting of my hand in a wave, or salute. A milli-second behind my gesture, her eyes widened in terror. It was clear that she, who had nearly been blasted from her bed two weeks before, thought that I held a weapon and was intent on killing her. It only lasted for that moment, and she didn’t skip a beat as she walked slowly in front of me, her face once again impassive. She was an Iron Lady, indeed, and I continue to feel haunted by how I had taxed her courage. That was not my last sight of Mrs. Thatcher. Twenty-odd years later, in 2005 or 2006, when John Selborne was giving a speech in the House of Lords, David and I were there at his invitation. Afterwards, as we were leaving the chamber to go out to dinner, I approached a doorway, and then stepped back as someone else was intent on coming through. It was Mrs. Thatcher, now a baroness after retiring from active politics in 1992. She had the puzzled and fearful look I remember seeing in my Dad, when his dementia had begun to prevent him from following normal conversation. I can still hear her expensive shoes clacking on the marble floor as she walked away.
At 2 p.m. on September 28, 2020, I told Dr. Perlo in Somerville about my shortness of breath on a flat path at Menotomy Park. By 4 p.m., I had been admitted to Mt. Auburn Hospital with a slow heartbeat. In early evening, two resident cardio doctors came to my room, chatted casually and then changed their tone.

“We need to ask you three questions related to the possibility of your heart stopping during the night. If that happens, do you give us permission to use CPR to stimulate your heart?”

“Yes.”

“Do you give us permission to use the defibrillator by your bed side to give your heart a shock to start it beating again?”

“Yes.” I could feel anxiety just hearing these questions.

“Do you give us permission to intubate your lungs if necessary to get air into them for you to breathe?”

“Yes,” I again uttered. “Whatever you need to do to keep me alive.”

I felt a strong sense of urgency. I wrote my husband Chris and son Carter about some end-of-life choices. The nurses monitored my heart rate from the nursing station, not wanting it to go below 35. It settled into the 30s—30, 35, 33. I wanted to be sure to get through the night.

In those nighttime hours I found deep comfort in songs that I knew by heart.

I’d think of one song that I love to sing—folk music, Broadway, camp, spiritual—and that song would lead to another. If I Loved You, You’ll Never Walk Alone, Wouldn’t It Be Loverly? Some Enchanted Evening, Climb Every Mountain, Swing Low, How Great Thou Art, It’s a Pleasure to Know You, Sailor’s Prayer, Farthest Field, Pack up Your Sorrows. The songs kept me company through this long dark night. I didn’t feel scared, but I didn’t want to fall asleep. I knew heart rates drop during sleep.

Around 5 a.m., Martha, the night nurse, ran into my room, “Are you alright? Are you dizzy or feeling faint?”

“I’m okay, just resting.”

“Oh, thank goodness. The monitor went off when your heart rate hit 25.”

I could hardly speak. “Thanks, Martha. I saw you running in. I’m fine.”

I knew I had made it through the night.

That morning I wanted to speak directly with the cardio team about options. Finally, at 1 p.m., the surgeon, Dr. Binu Phillips, arrived alone. He started speaking about a pacemaker as if it were an already-made decision.

Wait, Dr. Philips,” I said. “What are the other treatment options?”

“We really have only one option.
The electrical system in your heart is skipping a beat. It’s not delivering a strong enough heartbeat to the atrium to get another heartbeat to the right ventricle to pump blood out to the body. You need a pacemaker to initiate that second heartbeat.

“So,” I paused, “what kind of anesthesia would you use?”

“A local --you won’t be completely out. You’ll hear everything and feel some pressure, but you won’t feel any pain. It’s about a 1-¼ hour procedure; you’ll be back here within two hours.”

“This sounds pretty clear to me. Do you agree, Chris?”

“Absolutely,” he answered quickly, nodding.I paused for a very short second.

“When could you do it?”

“We could get you down there by 1:30 and have the procedure at 2.”

I nodded. “Fine. Thank you.”

I felt very little anxiety about this short procedure; I’d been ready since this morning. I kissed Chris goodbye, saying “I’ll see you soon.” I met Lisa, the cardio nurse who would administer the anesthesia and stay with me. She described the pacemaker clearly.

“It’s a small computer in a metal box about matchbook size that’s implanted beneath the skin below your left collarbone. It’ll have two leads fed through veins to the muscle of the heart. The longer one goes to the right ventricle to provide the needed heartbeat; the shorter one goes to the right atrium, as a backup for the future.”

I was rolled into the cardio operating room where they restrained my limbs and wrapped my lower legs in inflatable pulsating pads. So relaxing! Lisa injected Benedryl into my right arm. A gauze-like cover was put over my eyes. I could hear voices and learned that Dr. Philips explained everything step by step to a young doctor behind him.

Then, it was done. Shortly after 3 p.m. I was back in Lisa’s office where I gulped down orange juice, my first sustenance since midnight. I asked her if it had gone well, and she said, matter-of-factly, “Yes.” I yearned for more assurance. I wanted to know that this pacemaker in me had gone in perfectly. I stayed the night in the Hospital, so they could monitor everything. I slept so well! The next day went smoothly and around 3:00 p.m., Yeshi went over the discharge instructions, and Rosa wheeled me to our car door.

Ah... Chris! Fresh air! Sunshine!

We were home almost exactly 48 hours after my initial appointment. Home, at last, with Chris, our dog Emma, and my new lifelong pacemaker companion.

*The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you.*

*Don’t go back to sleep.*

*You must ask for what you really want.*

*Don’t go back to sleep.*

*People are going back and forth across the doorsill where the two worlds touch.*

*The door is round and open.*

*Don’t go back to sleep.*

- Jalaluddin Rumi
Missy Cowdog
Polly Tausch

A year or so after I moved up into the mountains east of Albuquerque, my fiancé, Tom, arrived with a large carton in his car. A present for me, something to keep me company while I lived up there by myself. I peered into the mysterious box and spied two deep dark smiling eyes, a set of perky little ears, a round red body, and a stubby wagging tail. A puppy. An addition to my mountain home, a worthy and eager companion, sure to keep me safe.

Released from the confines of the carton, the puppy perked up and checked out the world. She trotted around, sniffing the trees and bushes, making her mark on her new home, and then returned to us and barked her approval. She wagged her tail so vigorously, her entire rear quarter wagged as well. Her enthusiasm was contagious and I was a convert. It may have been instant love; I’m not sure. She smiled and I smiled. She wagged and I may have wagged right back.

Tom explained she came from a litter of Australian Cattledogs, raised on a ranch down in the Rio Grande Valley, some hundred miles south of Albuquerque. The breed was known locally as Heelers, for reasons I was soon to learn, and as she wore a marbled red coat, she was called a Red Heeler.

Tom headed down to True Value to purchase fencing to build a pen for the puppy, and I decided to take the little red dog to my veterinarian to have her checked out. She rode proudly to the clinic in her cardboard box as we sped down the highway into Albuquerque. Over the years Dr. Hume had helped me raise two Siamese Cats and a Bearded Collie, and she appeared eager to meet my new critter. I set the carton down on the exam table and she smiled as she peeked inside. Her smile changed as she stifled a scream, picked up the box and dog in one fell swoop, and ran with it out the back of the clinic.

Concerned, I trailed along.

“Fleas!” she cried.

“Oh, those little black things? I wondered what they were.” Poppy seeds, I must have thought. If I’d thought. I was a novice country person; I’d never seen a flea. How was I to know?

Well, the box disappeared into the trash, my brave little puppy was immersed in a messy dip, and Dr. Hume returned to explain that animals that were raised on farms and ranches often had fleas. She’d been terrified to get them in her clinic and had gotten the puppy outside expeditiously. I agreed with her course of action. She should not have fleas in her clinic, and I certainly didn’t want them in my house. We two frequently agreed on things. Well, she sent me home that day with enough medicine for several more do-it-yourself dips, and even found a new doggie carton for me to use. Crisis averted. Well, the first one anyway.

Tom and I hurried to build a safe place for the puppy to spend her days while I was at work. My mountain hovel sported a nice sized deck bordered by a wooden fence.
We fastened a strip of fencing onto the railing, making a sturdy, safe enclosure for the puppy. Here she resided until two more flea dips were completed and the fleas, slain mercilessly by chemical battle, lay dead on the wood plank floor. I am sure the puppy enjoyed this special daytime accommodation. Not too many cattledogs are fortunate enough to enjoy the view that she enjoyed each day: a forest of ponderosa pines, merrily singing birds, and a deep New Mexico blue sky. It was here she made the acquaintance of Ms. Agatha Marple, a long, sleek-coated grey cat that domiciled below the deck. She had come with the house when I purchased it, stating her claim preceded mine, and ended up being a permanent addition to an obviously literary household.

But, I am disjointed in this memoir and must move on to important things: the name for this miraculous red fireball of a puppy. I reasoned, she'd come from a ranch and I was now living in rural New Mexico, so she was indeed a ranch dog. She needed an appropriate name, one that befitted her personality. At this time, one of my favorite series of children's books was none other than Hank the Cowdog. In these wonderful stories, Hank the Cowdog was the ranch foreman. The parallel was obvious, because regardless of her size, Missy was soon going to be in charge.

Hank's girlfriend was called Missy Coyote. My new little girl would share her name, but of course, being a modern champion of female dogs' rights, her status would be elevated to that of Hank: Ranch Forewoman. And of course, with the elevation of ranch position, she soon became addressed as Missy Cowdog. Over time, it was proven that naming Missy Cowdog after such a famous literary figure was a good idea. She appreciated the name and position, spending her life trying to live up to it. Which she did very well.

Now, neither Tom nor I knew much about farms or ranches or living in the country. And we certainly knew nothing about ranch dogs, like Missy Cowdog. But it didn't take long to discover that Heelers have inordinately high energy levels. They are used to herd cattle (remember, she was born on a ranch), and spend their days running behind and herding cows. So she ran a lot. A lot.

And Heelers' instinct is to nip cow hooves and thus herd the cows for the ranchers. Unfortunately, our ranch forewoman had no cows. Pretty easy to guess who got to be the cow substitute, isn't it? Time revealed this trait was not unlearnable. No matter the technique or training, and despite her otherwise behavioral perfection, Missy gently nipped my heels, guiding me through the next fourteen years of my life.

Did I mention the inexhaustible energy of these ranch dogs? Let me mention it yet again. On a typical workday morning, Missy and I spent at least one half hour playing the tennis ball game. I’d throw a near homerun ball, and the Cowdog would tear down the hill, trying to beat it to the bottom, grab it (mid-air...was that possible?), and then tear at breakneck speed back up the hill. At the split second she opened her mouth to drop the ball for me, I’d let off a world series pitch of the second ball. Before the first ball actually hit the ground, she was off again. Non-stop repeats of this activity, this constant blur of motion, lasted
Then Missy was lodged in her deck pen under the supervision of Agatha Marple, and I hurried to school to relax with my six and seven year old students. Upon my return each afternoon, Missy and I took a long walk. Then after dinner, she ran around the house (you could make a circle going through the living and kitchen areas), and I knelt on all fours barking as she ran by. Then we settled in for the evening.

After the ten o’clock news, I took Missy outside to water her for the night. At this late hour, I was ready for bed, and not in the mood to wait for a lot of sniffing and pawing around. So, I decided to try a bit of operant conditioning. When Missy began her actual evening pee, I created and sang a song, one I later named The Wheedle Song. It was a complete success and Missy was able to pee on demand in any situation. This musical device served us well over the coming years. Surely I should seek a copyright?

When Missy reached six months of age, we scampered off to puppy school. I was excited; Missy was not. In fact, her attitude was deplorable as she acted bored and refused to cooperate. The teacher made several derogatory remarks about Heelers, which may have been overheard, and suggested Missy might be ready for school by about Age Two. I was insulted; Missy was disgusted. At the end of the class, we found out we had flunked. I mean, flunked? How did I gather all my academic laurels and then flunk Puppy School?

Dejected, we drove home in complete silence. We went out on the deck and I sat Missy down and explained my expectations. She fastened those dark, bright eyes on my face and seemed to nod in understanding. Then her tail started wagging again, then her entire rear end, and I realized this whole thing was nonsense. I told her we didn’t need that stupid class to learn these things. She apparently agreed and proceeded to perform every command I made. She sat. She lay down. She stayed. I patted my leg and she walked by my side as we hiked around under the trees. A+ performance. I don’t think Missy really had a large class personality. And obviously waiting until age two wouldn’t have made any difference at all.

At the end of one school day, I pulled up into the driveway and there sat Missy Cowdog, outside of her pen, eagerly perched on the steps to the deck. Obviously, her pen had been only a training pen, and she had graduated herself. She stood, wagged her tail, and walked over to welcome me home. Home to our house, the one where the two of us lived, I realized. Yes, she had brought me companionship and I certainly felt safe. And on top of that, I’d developed one hell of strong pitching arm.

In time, Tom and I married and continued a foray into rural living on a farm near where Missy had been born. Here she lay down roots and ran the place, making many new friends: sheep and goats, chickens and geese. And skunks. Whew - but I’ll skip that adventure. The wide open spaces suited her and she tore from one place to another, once coming up behind me and knocking me clear off my feet. That escapade landed me in a cast for six weeks, but eventually I forgave her. Her smiling deep eyes, perky ears, cocked to hear the faintest sound, her tail that wagged so hard her entire rump danced.

Over time, she became a very gentle nipper, more of a nuzzler, as she guided me along my path. She would sit for hours and watch my face, my eyes, reading my mind to determine what I might need. I believe I was her life project. She loved me unconditionally and was the best friend I have ever had.
Bob Avallone

Bird in Tree
Pandemic Perk
Pam Giller

Maybe it's the appeal of the cascading tawny curls that frame her plump cheeks and bounce into ringlets when she laughs or nods vigorously. Maybe it's the rapt attention that widens her gray green eyes, rimmed in black, just like her father's. Or maybe it is because she is my youngest grandchild, the last of the little ones.

No matter. The joy of reading with Nora on Zoom these past weeks has lightened the looming shadow of Covid 19. Nora hosts our sessions. She lets me into the meeting while sitting cross-legged on her bed. "Hi, GramPam." She waves.

At age seven, Nora is a capable reader. But she is bored. During this lingering pandemic, she cannot have playdates. Her brothers, twelve-year-old twins, sometimes play with her. Still the hours drag. Reading together is a highlight for both of us, a time especially for Nora. It reminds me of the pleasures of reading to my sons—Nora's father and his older brother.

Nora and I have been immersed in the tall tale adventures of Josh McBroom, a cheerful chap who lands on a one-acre farm with topsoil so rich that when he drops dried beans along a row, stalks grow behind him as he plants. By the time he gets to the end of the row, green beans on the first stalks are ready for picking. Nora laughs.

Another time, McBroom's son drops a nickel in the topsoil. Before he can find it, that nickel has grown into a quarter." Nora shakes her head. "That could even more not happen!"

I ask her about the title of the next story, "McBroom's Ear." "Hmm . . . What do you suppose his ear has to do with the farm?"

Nora giggles. "Maybe he takes a nap on the topsoil, on his side. And his ear grows so big and heavy, he can't get up!"

"Maybe!"

Nora shifts position to lie on her stomach, chin resting on her palms. She is so close I can almost touch her. I yearn to reach out and hug her.

Instead, I read the story. In the beastly hot weather, McBroom decides that corn will be a hearty crop. "Oh, oh. That kind of ear!" Nora's boisterous enthusiasm lifts me up, floats me above worries about the virus.

Memories of reading to my sons bubble up. We read most nights until they were 11 or 12—humor, fantasy, historical fiction. So much shared laughter. Sometimes, a story would spark conversation about family, friendship, moral dilemmas.
New phrases became part of our family lingo. "Just like Charlotte," our term for someone both talented and generous, was inspired by the ending of E.B. White’s Charlotte’s Web: “It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both.”

In the McBroom story, an ear of corn grows so enormous that McBroom straps it to the top of his car to transport it to the county fair competition. "Uh, oh," Nora says. "I hope it doesn’t crash through the roof!” Not only does the corn win first, second, and third prize, but in the heat of the barn, the kernels pop into huge pieces of popcorn.

“McBroom is so funny! I’m going to tell the whole story to Dad and the boys, then later to Mom.”

“I bet they’ll laugh out loud. Tell me about it next time, Nora. . . . Let’s see. How about we Zoom for another story next Wednesday at 2 in the afternoon.”

Her brow wrinkles, as if she is mentally checking her calendar. “Next Wednesday is good.”

“Great. I’ll see you next week. I love you, Nora.”

She graciously overlooks my lapse into sentiment. “Bye.” Holding an open palm toward me, she slowly slides it along the screen. A gesture worthy of Kate, Duchess of Cambridge.

I click, “Leave the meeting.”
Woody and Me and Larry Doby
Larry Abramson

My next door neighbor and I are very much alike. Woody is a midwestern, Bible school educated, Evangelical, retired oncologist. I am an east coast, ivy league, non-observant Jewish retired lawyer and businessman. But the similarities don’t end here. We both are conversant in the minutiae of 1940s and 1950s major league baseball to a degree that would probably identify us as idiot savants. In fact we are knowledgeable to a degree that could only apply to post war baby boomers who grew up addicted to baseball cards.

Once each new season’s cards came out, in Bazooka Bubble Gum or Topps packs, studying and memorization began. In the early 1950s a ten year old boy did not have all that many distractions. No cell phones or laptops or video games. Television in Boston consisted of two channels, that was when the vertical and or horizontal tuning did not require adjustment. So there was ample opportunity to osmose baseball facts and statistics from these wonderful cards. Note also that each card contained all relevant info and stats from the beginning of each player’s major league career. Here was an opportunity to know facts which went back to one’s birth in the 1940s.

Woody and I met in 2013 when we (Linda and I) moved into the same new condo development as Woody and his Linda (hereinafter referred to as L2). It does not take long to spot a brother in baseball trivia. Woody would try to catch me with the obvious questions. “What was Minoso’s real first name?” Well, pshaw, everyone knows it was Orestes." How many career RBIs would Ernie Banks have had if the Cubs could ever put a man on base?” Everyone knows this: about two bazillion. "Who was the number one White Sox pitcher while Sherm Lollar was their catcher?” Answer: Billy Pierce. “Why did the losing Cubs always outdraw the winning White Sox.” This is an existential inquiry beyond everyone’s pay grade.

We had different opinions on many questions, but not on Larry Doby. Never have two fans agreed more strongly about anything, in fact, Larry Doby was the subject most often discussed over the next five years as I drove us to classes at Tufts Osher. During that time Woody’s Alzheimers regularly progressed. He had more and more difficulty fielding most questions, unless they were baseball questions. His distant memory, meaning his baseball memory, remained excellent. By year four, as we drove into class, Woody might ask me every few minutes how many students attended Tufts. I might ask Woody (already knowing the answer) when his grandkids were next coming to visit. Woody would have to deflect, saying “Oh, my wife has that all figured out” Then we would arrive in class and Woody, in five years of “Great Decisions” and numerous other courses, never once participated in class discussion.

But there was no doubt on how he stood vis-à-vis Larry Doby. You, gentle reader, probably have no opinion on the subject. This is to your eternal discredit. Why if I asked this august group, “Who was the first player to break the color barrier in MLB”, you would all shout “Jackie Robinson.” And you would be right. But that was in the National League. Just three months later, Larry Doby started his career with the Cleveland Indians.
He wasn’t as exciting to watch as Jackie, but he was first rate. Like Jackie, he could ignore taunts and jeers and consistently play excellent ball. Larry was a seven time All Star, the American League HR champ two years, batting champ one year. His second year in MLB his team, the Indians, won the World Series. Larry was the first American-African to play on a World Series champion team.

We would each go on ad nauseam, comparing Bill Veeck (owner, president) of the Indians to Branch Rickey (general manager and part owner) of the Dodgers. Both men thought it would be good for business to bring up talent honed in the Negro Leagues and also thought that it was the right thing to do. Branch Rickey knew with existential certitude that God was a Methodist (like himself) and that God loved baseball. You can see that Woody and I had plenty to discuss.

And discuss we did as we attended Tufts together for years. Woody did better in the baseball filled car rides than in the classes or at the “lunch and learns” but at least he felt participatory. In the earlier years he knew a few other students and said some hellos. These courses had the additional benefit of freeing L2 up for the day to attend to whatever could not be done while she was busy serving as prime caregiver.

The most remarkable and praiseworthy thing about Woody was that he was fully aware of his continuous decline and of the inevitable end. He always maintained his smile, his friendliness, and his sweet disposition. In his years as an oncologist, he had distinguished himself as being an exceptionally kind doctor who bought Christmas presents for his shut-in patients and personally delivered those presents on Christmas day.

Around 2017 Woody’s decline accelerated. Contemporaneously, my wife was experiencing steady declines in mobility and in vision, both related to her several cancer neurosurgeries and to a course of proton treatment that had caused cerebral edema. We, as couples, invited the other for dinner, for barbecues, and enjoyed the company, particularly where both couples were dealing with extensive disability and socializing with the uninitiated was difficult. Support extended even further. Linda began to “miss” her transfers. She would suddenly fall when attempting to transfer, with my help and “Posey” belts, from wheelchair to toilet or to armchair or to bed, or vice versa. Our first call was always to L2 and Woody. They would come over at all hours. They insisted on being the first call. Woody, memory impaired, would accept the explanation that Linda had fallen and that we needed his help to lift her up. So Woody would lift Linda under one arm, I under the other, and L2 would steer the wheelchair to scoop up Linda.

My Linda passed away January of 2020. In September of 2020 Woody required full time care and went to live at a nearby Alzheimer facility. He is a brave man and he has always been a good friend. That friendship grew out of our mutual love of baseball trivia and our joint appreciation of Larry Doby.