

Revelations

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I think that for the most part, our lives are lived in obscurity, which we all too often mistake for revelation. We fly mostly blind, with the illusion of sight. Let me illustrate with my own life, since I can hardly impose such a dire thought on the rest of you. Perhaps the largest obscurity of my life was my complete repudiation of art for well over forty years. When I decided at age 18, with the help of a thoughtless teacher, that I had a facile hand, but didn't possess an artist's mind, I lay down pen, pencil and brush for what I thought was good riddance and forever.

My life unfolded thereafter full of what I thought was accomplishment: marriage, teaching first grade, motherhood, some serious flute playing, graduate school, a career full of chasings after grant support, research projects, journal articles, teaching psychology and medical students, and giving loving care to patients. These were all worthy pursuits, full of satisfactions, but it was not until the accident of a friend's insistence that I join her watercolor workshop that, in my 63rd year, I found the very essence of my being. Could I have known that I was living in the obscurity of an artless life, and could discover a light I didn't even know was there? Where had it gone? How could I have lost it? I had no idea.

A veritable flood of revelations rushed in when I attended my 50th high school reunion a few weeks ago. In Mt. Lebanon, Pennsylvania, a bedroom suburb of Pittsburgh, I always felt like a fish out of water, especially in high school. After all these years, three amazingly primitive motivations pulled me to this event. First, I was curious what people looked like, and felt pretty confident that I looked better than most of them. Second, I wanted to show the girls in the popular group who didn't let me in, and the kids in Honors English who thought they were smarter than everybody else, how successful I am, with my Harvard degrees and career, doctor husband, second home, and my own website and all. And third, I yearned to reconnect with the two friends that I had abandoned in a flash in my dash to college and a new life.

The first was easy. After taking about a week to figure out what I would wear to the one event I decided to go to, I did look pretty good. Some people might have looked better, but I didn't pay any attention to them. I preempted the second issue by personally contacting just about everyone that wrote a profile on our reunion website, and I wrote an elaborate profile myself, complete with illustrations. I decided that I had to be proactive in the popularity department. People were mostly delighted that I contacted them. Patty, one "popular" and "Honors English" girl who had also worked in Africa with the State Department, actually reached out to me, and I found her to be a terrific person that I would like to see again. The revelation here is that I can change my fate if I take charge of it, and in changing my fate find connections to people that had been obscured.

Number three concerned wanting to see Maggie and Judy again, after fifty years of absolutely no contact. Maggie, Judy and I had been friends of propinquity. We lived within a block of each other, Maggie on the corner and I at the dead end of our leafy block of small stone and brick houses, Judy one street over. Judy and I played together from age nine, and Maggie moved in when we were all twelve. Judy and I went to girl scouts before I quit in 6th grade (that's another story), and we three hung out together after Maggie arrived. I learned the joys of pastitsio and baklava from Maggie's generous Greek mother, and remember her porch as the center of our threesome. What I don't remember is the kind of girlhood friendship that includes shared confidences, mutual advice about clothes or boys (of whom there were few to none), or some of the other intimacies that girls often share. What I do remember is walking the mile to school together, books pressed to our chests, a sense of being second tier girls hanging over me.

When Judy walked through the door of the Crown Plaza this September, I recognized her immediately. She was the girl I remembered: pretty, genuine, thoughtful, and engaged. Maggie arrived later, vivid, smart, and outspoken. There is nothing second tier about these women. I was drawn to them both immediately and can't fathom why I didn't realize what wonderful people they were. How could I have let them go? I remember Groucho Marx's joke that he would never want to belong to a country club that would accept him as a member. Perhaps our worth to each other was obscured by a mutual belief in our own inferiority. Our affinities now, and Maggie and Judy's accomplishments as an actor/director and scientist, and most of all their human qualities, are a revelation.

At one point while looking for a place to sit and talk before Maggie arrived, Judy and I walked into the hotel bar, where we found several of our classmates wearing nametags. We dutifully wrote our names on nametags as well. After chatting happily with Patty for a few minutes, another classmate told us that this was a meeting of the Honors English students. My whole body flushed with a feeling of shame and inferiority, despite fifty years and a resume full of publications. Judy responded eagerly to my suggestion that we find a different spot. This was another moment of revelation. Going back to the place and people of my childhood surfaced earlier feelings that are alive and well in my psyche, thank you very much, whether I acknowledge them or not.

Perceptually, we also live in a universe of obscurity and revelation. We humans stumble through a world whose richness we can only begin to sample. Hawk moths see color at night, we see only gray. Birds tell each other apart by detecting arrangements of collagen fibers in their skin that create unique patterns of iridescence that we cannot see, marine mammals communicate with polarized light (Science, vol. 299, January 24, 2003).

Whales, dogs, and teenagers hear and communicate through sounds well beyond what our ears can hear. A dog's sense of smell is said to be 1000 times as sensitive as that of humans (UNP-0066, July 2005, Julio E. Correa, Extension Animal Scientist, Associate Professor, Food and Animal Sciences, Alabama A&M University). We live in an atmosphere of invisible waves and frequencies we don't perceive unless we have the receptors to see, hear, feel, taste or smell them. We can thank science for revelations about the physical world, such as the senses and psyches of animals that suggest how

astounding the world must be beyond our limited perceptions, and for technologies that permit us to see phenomena that would otherwise be invisible. Other revelations, however, lead us to wonder whether there is a metaphysical world with waves and frequencies as well.

Last Sunday, Eli and I attended an elegant engagement party at a fine Boston Hotel. The party was a marvel of planning. Massive vases of purple and green flowers sat on each table, purple napkins and restroom towels were printed in gold with the names of the bride and groom-to-be, purple feathers adorned green place cards, chocolate favors were tied with purple bows. This party was a labor of love and detail, and we felt honored to be there. After a generous brunch buffet, the mother of the groom-to-be announced that someone who had made over 90 appearances on national television and entertained six times at the White House was at the party. With that introduction, an unassuming man in a flashy suit stood up and told us that today our world would change forever.

His name was Jon Stetson. He called on people to think of numbers and told us what they were. He handed people books, had them randomly choose a word from any page and without their speaking, wrote the words they had chosen on a large pad of paper. He named the playing cards they had drawn, the movie a woman wrote down and placed in a sealed envelop an hour before, the name of the boy who had given another woman her first kiss, and people's astrological signs and birthdays. At the end of an hour that left us gasping, he wrote something down on his pad of paper that we couldn't see, folded it and gave it to the groom to sit on. He then asked the bride to choose a word from a book he

gave her. He asked her if the word was “Lumberjack.” It was. He then asked her fiancé to unfold the paper he had sat on. It said 123b7. Everybody laughed, thinking that finally, he got something wrong. Jon Stetson then turned to another young man left standing to whom he had earlier given a small dictionary. He asked him to turn to page 123 and to read the seventh definition up from the bottom. The word was “Lumberjack.” Mr. Stetson had written down the formula to find the word in the dictionary BEFORE the bride had chosen the word.

Mr. Stetson calls himself a mentalist. His feat however, leaves us not only with the problem of whether he can read minds, but also with whether he can read the future mind, not to mention the placement of the content of that future mind in a dictionary held by a young man who had been standing by his chair clutching it in his hand for the previous ten minutes. Could it be that mental activity creates waves that only a very few gifted individuals can detect? That makes some sense, since the brain generates blood flow, oxygen use, and sugar metabolism that can be recorded by technologies such as positron emission tomography. But even though PET scans can trace the pathways of mental activity in response to particular stimuli, they can’t tell us if the center that’s lighting up is thinking about the word “Lumberjack.” And - that doesn’t address the problem of time, that Mr. Stetson wrote down the placement of Lumberjack in the dictionary BEFORE the bride had made her selection.

Could it be that we really want to be amazed and deceived by the promise of revelations? Perhaps Mr. Stetson was charmingly fooling a loving, happy, gullible audience. Even

though common sense would tell us that time is linear, and that we can't predict a future we haven't experienced, every day we live in a world in which sight and sound, time and space, both do and don't fool us. At night, we see stars that died billions of years ago. When we sit at the back of Symphony Hall, we hear the sound of the orchestra a fraction of a second after we see the conductor's arm fall. Sight travels faster than sound, the thunder booms after the lightning flashes. Our experience tells us that we can predict the auditory future through the conductor's arm and the lightning's flash. Can we predict other futures as well?

My son-in-law tells of going to a fortuneteller in his parents' village a thousand miles from the Northern Cameroon town where he had recently met our Peace Corps daughter. Usmanou had told no one in his family or his village about his friendship with Mary-Helen. He arrived at the fortuneteller's courtyard soon after dawn when the light shone at just the right angle on the water in the fortuneteller's calabash. The seer carefully read the reflections on the water. He told Usmanou that he had a woman in his life with very pale skin and that her father that had once been very sick. As the fortuneteller slapped his back first behind one shoulder and then the other, he said, "He was sick here, or here." Only later did Usmanou learn that when Mary-Helen's father was 28, he had surgery for a stage three melanoma behind his right shoulder. His lymph nodes and a large portion of the muscle had been removed, and for years we lived with the dread of a recurrence.

I have had my own experiences of seeing into the future, though I didn't always know it at the time. One experience concerns bears. We have a second home in the Berkshires,

and our property is next to a wildlife sanctuary. There are bears in this wilderness, and they leave signs of their presence all over the place: the overturned garbage can, bungees akimbo, detritus strewn all over the road; the iron rod holding the pouch of thistle seed for the warblers bent to the ground. But mostly, the bears are elusive. About a year ago as we neared our house after dinner out with friends, in response to a question about animals I said that we see a bear about once a year. As we rounded the corner the friend cried, "There he is," and indeed, there he was, as big as a Volkswagen, right in front of our home. As we approached, the bear lumbered off into the property across the street. This spring we invited a young friend to visit us. As we strolled onto the road, I mentioned that we see a bear about once a year, to which our guest replied, "and there he is." And there he was. Last year and this, the only times we saw a bear were immediately after an infrequent mention of bears. Could this suggest that time, rather than being linear, somehow wraps around us, to be dipped into, past, present, and future, by those whom we believe have the power of revelation?

If time wraps around us, then logic, in this illogical universe, would suggest not only that the present might dip into the future, but that the past could dip into the present as well. My most powerful experience of the present dipping into the future was when I had a vivid mental image of exactly how my father would die. This had never happened before, and the image was so vivid that I became upset and asked my visiting friend to leave. Several weeks later, my father died suddenly and unexpectedly exactly as I had envisioned. The day after his death, a flower that he was planting when he collapsed opened as I passed it. I have never been able to shake the possibility that my father's

spirit inhabited that flower, saying good-by. Even more powerful was my mother's leave taking, when I was awakened as never before or since by extra heartbeats, and learned in the morning that she had died during the night.

What do we take from these experiences of revelation and obscurity? Perhaps revelation is like a golden thread weaving its way through a tangled or orderly universe, and there are many incomprehensible experiences we just have to accept. Recently, I had a conversation with Babs, an old high school classmate with whom I connected at the reunion. Babs remembered my first elementary school, the Julia Ward Howe, and was intrigued with my writing an essay on revelations for a club that Julia Ward Howe founded. Babs is a person of faith, and I told her that after writing about revelations, I believe in mystery. What I can't do is make the leap from mystery to God. Bab's response was that perhaps we are talking about the same thing, whatever we call it. Babs was the kid that failed 9th grade English, yet as an adult has developed a remarkable gift for the written and spoken word. She works for Habitat for Humanity and cares passionately about social justice. Her odyssey and values share much with mine. Babs told me that for her, having a personal God makes the mystery and the journey more "fun."

For me the presence of revelations in the midst of mysteries is a little scary as well as fun, and leaves me wide to possibilities, with or without explanations.