

**The Springbank Middle School Grade
Seven Band
at Camp Caroline:
A Few Reasons to Introspect and Meditate**

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October 20, 2004

<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

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If we could see the miracle of a single flower clearly, our whole life would change.
Buddha

Introduction

The following is a stream of consciousness that emerged when I sat down to write this morning about a simple walk in the woods. As I re-read it, I realized that I meandered so far before getting to my point that some may quit reading before coming to what motivated me to write. My apologies. But this is how my mind works.

I don't suggest that those who experience life differently than I do are missing something. This is just one guy's experience, in all its uniqueness and weirdness, for what it is worth. I expect many will read it and say "What the hell is he going on about?" while a few think, "Oh yes, THAT is what I felt but could not quite put my finger on!" It is that feeling of sensing what had been inarticulate beneath the surface that at times seems like my constant companion these days.

The Grade Seven Band at Camp Caroline

About three weeks ago I wrote something called "Changing Seasons" that can be found at <http://mccue.cc/bob/new.htm>. As there noted, fall in Canada's Rocky Mountains is more an event than a season. About ten days after I wrote Changing Seasons we had our first snow. And today is a wonderful white winter's day.

I am at a facility that during the summer operates as a Bible camp. It is located on the eastern, tree-covered slope of the Rockies between the towns of Sundre and Caroline, Alberta. We are about an hour north and a little east of Banff, as the crow flies. During the winter the camp keeps its staff busy by catering to school groups. And so, the world famous Springbank Middle School Grade Seven Band is having its annual three-day band camp here. I am the sole male chaperon. The trip, apparently, could not occur without at least one "Dad" and after several unheeded requests for volunteers my twelve-year-old daughter leaned on me pretty hard. My nominal duties include getting 25 twelve-year-old boys to go to sleep at night, to shower in the morning, to keep their rooms clean, and to generally obey their

bandleader. One was sick last night and so slept in my room with me. It might have had something to do with the huge (and very tasty) cinnamon bun and half quart of apple juice he had right before bedtime along with all of the rest of the kids. Go figure on that one. If it were my camp ... And who says Mormon's aren't Christian? "No alcohol is allowed on the premises, but let us help you load up on all the sugar you feel like eating."

In any event, I am just a figurehead here - a pretty face - kind of like the Queen of England. The bandleader (a charming, attractive young lady) was in the Canadian military before becoming a middle school teacher, and needs no crowd control help from me. So I just kind of hang out, look "dadish" and occasionally make gruff noises at the boys. I earned their respect in the time honoured male way by thrashing the best of them during a snow soccer game. So most do what I ask.

We have had many highlights; far too many to recount. But I will mention two that appealed particularly to my somewhat twisted nature. The first came while I was getting the soccer game organized and without intending to pun, said to one of the female teachers just before we went outside, "Don't worry, I've got the balls!" She looked shocked, and replied, "I won't argue with that" while barely stifling her laughter in apparent hope that her kids' minds would not go down the path her's had. None of them appeared to get it.

And then at suppertime a lovely desert was served - something resembling banana cream pie but cut into squares. I was seated at a table with six twelve-year-old kids. When one innocent girl saw what was coming, she leaned forward and said so that only our table could hear, "You guys are going to love this! It's called 'sex in a pan!'" A titter went around the table. One of the boys - perhaps not as socially astute as the rest - said, "Why do they call it that?" She replied, with a bright smile, "Because it is soooo good!" The look on his face indicated quite clearly that the concepts of "good" and "sex" were in separate, and opposing, universes. He looked like he might be sick, and involuntarily shivered. I suspect that this was the first time in his young life that those two opposing concepts - "sex" and "good" - had collided. Oh for a camera.

It obviously pleases my daughter that I am here, as long as I stay within the role she has defined for me. I am to be seen but not heard, which now that I think of it makes me realize that the Queen analogy has more legs than I initially thought. For example, I was told last night in a stage whisper, "You are embarrassing me!" while I was goofing around with some of the boys. I do my best, while not expecting to entirely please.

A Reason to Introspect

This morning while the kids were practising I went for a walk on the trails that have been cut through the forest here and had another of the seemingly endless stream of new experiences that have followed my departure from Mormonism. Many of these - as was this one - are related to the "present" v. "future" orientation idea.

For more respecting that, see <http://mccue.cc/bob/documents/future%20orientation.pdf>.

It would not be reasonable to suggest that a guy who has lived most of his life near Canada's Rocky Mountains does not understand snow and trees. But nonetheless I saw and felt some things today that moved me in ways I had not before experienced and so am writing this instead of working on the Oil and Gas Royalty Agreement I brought with me. I now invest much more time and energy than ever in just "being" instead of progressing toward some kind of a goal. I am becoming a human "being" and realizing that for much of my life I have been a human "doing". I am grateful for the luxury our society has provided that allow us to concern ourselves with things like this, and suggest that this is one of the many ways in which the products Mormonism sells are no longer suited to its market. In a time when survival was the issue (as it was in the Utah desert to which Brigham Young took his people so that he could have his way with them without the prying eyes of neighbours and lawmakers to interfere) the future oriented approach Mormonism uses had much more social utility that it now does. The trend in western society is clearly away from such institutionally oriented groups and toward more individualistic and present oriented approaches to life (See <http://wvs.isr.umich.edu/find.shtml>).

While walking after been transported by the experience I am about to try to recount, I was thinking about how I would describe happened, and wondered why I should even make the attempt since it would be impossible to convey in words what I had experienced. What I really needed, I thought, was a camera and some skills I don't have. And then I recalled the wise-beyond-his-years words of my ten-year-old son Kieran the other day. We were driving home from the hospital after visiting his then very sick 14-year-old brother Dallin, whose face was swollen almost beyond recognition by a serious infection on the right side of his jaw. Kieran had been upset by what he saw, and I asked him if he was glad he had come in for the visit. In a confident, self-satisfied manner, he said that he was, while leaning back in a half reclined bucket seat with both hands behind his head - one of his favourite "travel" positions. He said that after he got over the shock of seeing how "disgusting" his brother looked, it was good to hear his voice, know it was still him even though he looked so "weird", and to understand that he was getting better. I reminded him that we had taken pictures of Dallin each day so that he could remember how sick he had been, and that Kieran could just have looked at the pictures and talked to Dallin on the phone. "Naw," he said, "the pictures don't work. You have to see it yourself." So true, and of so many things.

So why should I attempt to describe what I saw today? A picture is worth a thousand words, and as Kieran pointed out, even pictures can't capture our experience.

As I thought about this, it occurred to me that I mostly try to describe things because the act of description helps me to peel back the layers of the experience itself so that I perceive it more fully. Or perhaps it is that by attempting to describe I am peeling back the parts of me that screen perception - or allowing myself to

enter the experience more fully; to partially merge with it. I am not sure what happens, but somehow the act of description makes me feel more alive and gives greater meaning to what I have experienced.

The best explanations of meditation I have read (See for example Newberg "Why God Won't Go Away", or his video interview on that topic at www.meaningoflife.tv) speak of concentration to the point at which we experience what some describe as a oneness with the universe. Scientists like Newberg have provided a lot of information about how the brain mechanics related to this kind of experience work. He, for example, has taken brain scans of people who are in the deepest stages of meditation. These show that during meditative epiphany, the parts of the brain that provide our sense of separateness from objects and experience around us - our sense of "self" - shut down. Similar things happen as the result of near death experiences, some types of epileptic seizures and the ingestion of certain drugs. In each case, it makes some sense that we would perceive this experience as unifying "us" with "everything else". If we are still aware but cannot perceive ourselves as separate from what surrounds us, it is hard to imagine how we could experience anything other than a unity with all that we believe exists.

The subject-object distinction is related to the concepts of figure (as in the subject of a painting) and ground (as in the background against which the figure is defined) in art, melody and harmony in music, and related concepts in mathematics. And in general, context affects or even determines meaning. Our perception of colours, distances, textures, etc. are all context dependant to a degree. Even when someone is rude to us, how much we know about her circumstances - the burdens she may be carrying - is largely determinative of how we react to her. The addition or deletion of a single important fact can radically alter how we react to a message that is delivered to us. A persuasive politician who was highly influential and who we chose to believe will often lose most of his influence when we learn that he has been convicted of defrauding the people who elected him. Change the "ground" and the very nature of the "figure" will often appear to change before our eyes.

I have recently been learning about and admiring the work of M.C. Escher (See Douglas Hoftstaeder "Godel Escher Bach", a short review at http://www.epinions.com/content_55857417860 , a long one at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/7598> or copies of Escher's prints at <http://home.comcast.net/~eschermc/>) which is mostly a study in the way in which context influences meaning in artistic works. Escher's prints often use figures that fade into and re-emerge from the ground (See http://home.comcast.net/~eschermc/Day_and_Night.jpg). Art and music that blur the distinction between figure and ground; subject and object; melody and harmony; for some reason fascinate us. I believe that this is because of our own relatively unstable position as "figures" against the "ground" that is the experience of our lives. We are much more ephemeral figures against a shimmering ground than the chiselled marble against a museum wall that we like to portray ourselves as. Hence, our attraction to artists like Escher and Bach.

When I focus on the immediate - the present - I regularly find experience that moves me as nothing ever before has. This gives me the chance to think deeply - or meditate if you would rather call it that - about what most moved me. I try to continue in this focus to the point of being able to understand more of what touched me. Attempting to describe my experience in writing is my primary method of maintaining this focus. I have some days passed a dozen consecutive hours in this fashion without hardly noticing them before finally going to bed or moving onto other things, completely drained of energy. To have passed two, or three or four unnoticed hours this way has for weeks at a time during the past two years been a daily occurrence. This is just enough to invigorate me; to spice my life. I seldom go for more than a few days without experiencing this. When I miss a day or two, I begin to feel restless, and then dead inside.

Another way to understand this experience is as one that for me brings about a partial collapse of the "subject" (me) "object" (experience) in my life. I become like one of Escher's animals, moving into the ground and then back out again (See <http://home.comcast.net/~eshermc/Reptiles.jpg>) or morphing through our interaction with the ground of experience from one thing to anything (See <http://home.comcast.net/~eshermc/whiteblack.jpg> or any of many other Escher prints - this was one of his stock themes). This does a number of useful things. Dr. Martin Seligman (See "Authentic Happiness") and others have labelled this a "flow" experience and indicate that it is of fundamental importance to our satisfaction with life, and sound mental health. Also, activities that absorb me to the point at which time no longer is perceived cause me to learn more about both myself and the context that gives both me and my life meaning than any other activity I have experienced. So ultimately, it is both happiness and self-revelation that is the goal of my attempts at experiential description, and what attracts me to it.

It felt odd to admit this to myself. I had assumed that the urge to record and describe had more to do with a desire to share my experience with others than anything else. It now seems to me that my efforts in this regard are in many ways - oddly - more a self-centred act than anything else. In a way, it is a lot like staring at multi-faceted mirrors.

This reminds me of something I read the other day about Richard Avedon, a famous photographer (See "The Economist", October 9, 2004). He said that "it was only by taking pictures that he felt he was alive" and it was how he discovered "who he was". It was said of him:

"Making a portrait was not a one-way street, with the photographer digging and intruding his lens into the mind of the sitter. Each new subject - a congressman standing by a flag, a dancer gesturing, a beekeeper with his charges crawling on his naked skin - also brought out in Mr. Avedon facets of his own character. The portraits, once done, represented less the sitter than his own opinions; the "human predicament" he wished to show was, in fact, his own. His autobiography, published in 1993, was composed of 300 hundred portraits of other people."

Tennessee Williams said something similar about a period of time after writing his first well-received play - "The Glass Menagerie". His fame changed the context of his life, and especially how he related to the people who had been his friends. His desire to write disappeared. He had no reason to write. His struggles as a writer were over. And he was miserable - "like a corpse on a rubber-wheeled table" or as if "walking around dead in my shoes", as he put it (See Tennessee Williams, "An Introduction to A Street Car Named Desire", p. 2). So he reframed his life by moving to Mexico where he was unknown and so was without the trappings of fame, and again began to write. Thus he re-entered the intense worlds that his imagination created as he explored those parts of the human predicament that most attracted him, and life returned. "A Street Car Named Desire", his Pulitzer Prize winning play, was the result.

I note that "A Street Car Named Desire", in addition to creating a couple of immortal characters in Blanche Dubois and Stanley Kowalski, is as nice a study in cognitive dissonance and the primacy of the reptilian over the rational brain as I have ever seen. That was what drew me to it. But I have not been able to get the story line and its caricature of certain aspects of human nature out of my mind since reading the play a week ago.

Williams' life was empty without his continual exploration of his context; his continual merging with and re-remerging from his ground of being as he dipped his pen into the deepest fonts that motivate human behaviour. He defined "what is good" for people like him as an:

"... obsessive interest in human affairs, plus a certain amount of compassion and moral conviction, that first made the experience of living something that must be translated into pigment or music or bodily movement or poetry or prose or anything that's dynamic and expressive - that's what's good for you ..." (See Tennessee Williams, "An Introduction to A Street Car Named Desire", p. 4)

Williams also said:

"... the only somebody worth being is the solitary and unseen you that existed from your first breath and which is the sum of your actions and so is constantly in a state of becoming under your own volition ..." (See Tennessee Williams, "An Introduction to A Street Car Named Desire", p. 4)

He captures nicely the balance psychologists like Steven Pinker (See "The Blank Slate") now tell us make up our major personality traits - roughly 50% genetics and 50% social conditioning. This discovering of self is the most exciting process I have ever experienced, and it is fuelled in my case by getting to know about the experience of others as by nothing else. So, I identify with Avedon and Williams in that the further I delve into the experience of others, the more of their echoes I hear in my own life. They are me, and I them, in a very real sense. Their experience brings me to life, in a way. So, the broader my array of understanding

in terms of the lives of others, the richer becomes my own. The distinction between subject and object; the student and the subject; the observer and the observed; is thus further blurred.

Williams' experience also suggests that the experience of entering into and then emerging from the most basic elements of our context - being reborn - is not necessarily an event that simply raises us to another plain of existence. Rather, it creates a need in us. It introduces us to a kind of life - a life of discovery - that is far more desirable than anything we have experienced, and shows us the price that must be paid to live it. To not pay that price after knowing what it purchases is to die, as Williams described it. The effort - even the pain - required to continually merge with and emerge from our ground of being is that price. And it buys a life-giving blood that promotes a certain kind of growth that only increases both our need for this experience, and our capacity to pay an ever increasing price for it. This is why people like Avedon and Williams chose to - perhaps even had to - return continually to what moved stirred their souls at the deepest level.

Another way to put what I just said is that I am only now beginning to realize how many layers this onion has. Losing my Mormon shell opened up to a universe of possibilities and it has been my privilege to explore those during the past couple of years. I initially perceived this as a life-changing event - a crossing of the Rubicon to another land. And in many ways it was that. However, I now see other Rubicons surrounding me - feel other shells beginning to crack - and am confident that the painful and incredibly rewarding process of re-evaluating my life's experience in fundamental ways will become a cycle through which I will likely pass several more times until I no longer have the vitality to negotiate its demanding course.

A Walk on a Winter's Day

What an excruciatingly long preamble to what motivated me to sit down to write. But I learned as few important things as I wrote it, and so feel that the effort was more than worthwhile from my point of view.

I climbed to the vantage point at which I had hoped yesterday to see the panorama, and today was able to see it. Nothing special. Just a lot of trees stretching out toward the horizon. The Rockies were not visible. However, the sunrise was spectacular. I found a log at the top of the hill, put my gloves on it to shield me from melting frost and sat down to enjoy the moment. I watched as the sky slowly became more more brilliant hued, and then while the colors began to fade as the sun neared the horizon.

I have been learning how to meditate. I have not attended a class, but read a couple of books and watched a video to help me get started. And while I am far from expert, what little I know has helped me to enjoy more passing moments than ever. By laying or sitting comfortably and focussing on my heartbeat and breath, I can quiet my skittering mind. This leaves a lingering peace when I recommence my day's activities. I have not found a way to make my mind blank, and can't imagine

that as a possibility. But by focussing on simple things - like breathing - I can achieve a state of relative mental calm without much difficulty.

I recently began to correspond with a Sufi software developer in Northern Pakistan - another Internet wonder. I asked him to teach me about his meditation technique and just a few days ago lesson number one arrived. He went through what I would call a typical body relaxation routine. This involved focussing on each muscle group and then releasing all tension from it. I do this in conjunction with my breathing. With each release of breath, I release the tension from a different part of my body, and gently bring my mind back to my breathing when it drifts away, as it inevitably does. However, his next suggestion was new to me, and after having experimented with it a couple of times I had still not found a way to make it work. And since he had also recommended meditating out of doors in the most beautiful place possible, as I watched the sun rise I thought this would be a perfect place to give his suggestions another try. So I closed my eyes and went through my breathing and heart beat relaxation routine, and felt my body start to become part of the log on which I was sitting. After I was as relaxed as I thought I could be, I moved into my friend Ali's "mind relaxation" routine.

Ali says that the mind needs to go through an exercise similar to that of the body to prepare for meditation. He recommended that I proceed as follows: After my body was fully relaxed, I was to visualize the blackest black possible and lose myself in that for as long as I could - several minutes if possible. This is harder to do than I had imagined. After having done that, I was to imagine the darkest blue possible and do the same thing. And then I was to progress color by color up the spectrum until I imagined the whitest white, and then I would have achieved mind relaxation to the extent possible and would be as close as I am capable of being to the kind of trance that is fundamental to the meditative experience.

I had tried to do this twice during the last few days while laying in my bed early in the morning in the dark (we are talking lazy man meditation here), and had not been able to make it work. That is, it did not seem to do anything for me. I soon discovered why.

Facing a sunrise, there was a blaze of white or pink light behind my eyelids. It was very difficult to imagine anything black. I struggled without success to hold a black image in my mind. Finally, I found that if I remembered something really black (I thought of looking down a well bore I could remember seeing and then imagining myself going into it) that this helped. But it was still hard mental work to sustain this image in my mind. Then I moved to blue and used my midnight blue silk bathrobe for this purpose. And so on. I stayed on each color for perhaps a minute.

As the colors became redder, and then yellow and so more resembled the light forcing its way through my eye lids, less effort was required to sustain the images in my mind. And when I simply yielded to perfect whiteness, there was a palpable sense of mental relief. I was more aware of a state of mental relaxation than I have ever been. What I had missed (I think - I will check this with Ali) is that I needed to create mental tension before I could perceive the effect of relaxation, just as during

the body relaxation exercise I at times tighten and then fully release a muscle or my entire body.

After yielding to the light from a rising sun, I sat bathed in peace for several minutes, and then opened my eyes with a deep sense of satisfaction to see how the sunrise was progressing. I found the sun's top edge just over the horizon, and the sky's colors scattered as a million diamonds up the snowy hillside atop which I sat. Because I was motionless, so were these points of light. My mind was so open and peaceful that the image of that crystalline hillside is now seared into me. And I continued to sit in the calm my relaxation efforts had created, but with a huge smile on my face.

A cloud passed before the sun during the course of perhaps a minute, slowly dimming and then extinguishing each diamond in the snow. And then the sun re-emerged with opposite effect.

I told myself over and over again how fortunate I am to be alive and to have agreed to come to Grade Seven Band camp. Few times have I felt as spiritually in tune as during those moments with light sparkling around me on that hilltop.

I again recalled Thoreau's words (Humility, like darkness, reveals heavenly lights), and thought he might approve of a second stanza.

Questions, like light, bring spirit into being.

Eventually I began to feel the cold and headed back to camp. We were to pack up and get ready to leave."

It's All About Perspective

With vehicles packed and noisy kids on the bus, I went into the administrative office to settle the long distance phone bill I had run up. The people who run Camp Caroline were fabulous. I thoroughly enjoyed interacting with them throughout the few days we were there. The following is part of the conversation that ensued between two of the clerical staff and me.

"Me: Wonderful place you have here. Say, I was out walking this morning and heard a high-powered rifle shot. Is hunting season open?

Office Staff 1: Just bow season. You probably heard someone taking a shot at a coyote or a cougar.

Me: Cougars? You have cougars around here? I didn't know that.

OS1: Oh yeah. And particularly these past few years.

OS2: Have you seen any this year?

OS1: Only one. But I've seen the Grizzly a few times. It often comes right down to the back of our house. It got one of our cows last summer, and the insurance had to pay up.

Me: Grizzlies too? Hmmm.

OS1: Only one that we know of. But there are a few blacks. We see them all the time.

Me: Wow! This is amazing country. Thanks so much folks."

Had this conversation occurred at the beginning of our stay instead of the end, I would have been deprived of several wonderful experiences. I would not walk alone without a rifle, let alone sit around in a self-induced trance, in a place I know to be frequented by cougars and bears. In fact, I am certain that I would not be capable of relaxing body or mind where I was sitting once fixed with the knowledge of who my companions might be. That additional information would have radically altered my perception - and hence for practical purposes, the very nature - of the places I enjoyed during the past couple of days. Change the information context, and you fundamentally change the nature of the experience.

Conclusion

The drive home was lovely. The Rockies were within view for much of it. And as we dropped down out of the mountains toward the prairie on which we live, the trees and bushes were covered with hoar frost that glistened in the sun. So fragile; so fleeting; so beautiful. This has long been one of my favorite sights.

Life does not get much better than this.