

Gratitude

by [Carl Nelson](#) (April 2022)



Blue Interior with Man and Dog, Biala, 1979

Preamble to Something Beautiful

The sperm and egg
require quite a preamble;
a lot of talk,
dinner and dance,
nights out,
firm commitments.

But people
who *can't* get along
often meet
to create a dung heap of event,
very fertile and highly prized,
which grows all manner
of rare occurrence
of all things beautiful...

drama, intrigue,
"War and Peace".
movies, burlesque,
hammers and nails, pencils and paper,
cups and spoons...
They sing,
"Let's Call the Whole Thing Off".

And it's a big hit!
Go figure.

Assessing what I say – that is the tone, the style, the affections of it – a thought which took me aback came unbidden, not that it hadn't been trying to be acknowledged by hanging around, producing a polite cough, raising its hand... It seemed that my writing might lack generosity, that I didn't demonstrate enough affection. After all, there exist a

multitude of friendly, generous, helpful Appalachians, and I have met and been befriended by many. Why do I have to be, if not grudging and curmudgeonly with my words, then rather aloof and assessing, as if I've never really taken off my coat to sit and stay awhile?

For example, my quite opinionated neighbor has also lent me some power tools from his construction business, in order to slant nail my tongue and groove porch slats along the tongue top so that no nail heads mar the porch surface. He also lent me a compression hammer in order to properly anchor my metal porch railings into the old concrete steps. Plus, he steered me towards a proper contractor to repair my front sidewalk, and gave me advice as regards many other home projects. He is also a fountain of information of local history and event. Plus he is an expert checker player and owns quite a collection of rare coins and currency. And he makes the continual effort to greet and chat. We share beers.

My neighbor down the street, who did a stint in prison for beating his mother with the Thanksgiving oven door, I also find working street side on a customer's pickup to fix its shock lifters while flurries of snow are whipping past. He's bent over with his dirty grey shorts showing as he is draining the pneumatic fluid and turning his head to greet me and my dog, Tater. Whether or not he is employed – this is not the profile of a worthless lay about. He smiles, he shakes his head with some slight self-deprecation. I like him, but rather like I might commiserate with a friendly jackal.

And my other neighbor who spent 18 months of hard time years past in Texas for bashing her boyfriend's car to death with a bat; she and her husband have become good friends. Our dogs share play dates, and we share activities. She's a lively, generous friend, and her husband is solid as a rock; a fellow who let me practice with my lock picking tools on his handcuffs.

Most of the people who have come to recognize Tater and I as we go for our daily walk, wave. It's quite common for people driving our residential streets to acknowledge us with a wave. The local poets welcomed me more or less. The local book readers took me in. Long married husbands will often honor their wives and their marriage by saying, "She put up with me." The local literary community has done this.

In other words, I seem in the ironic position of enjoying the walk, but not talking the talk. And I even wonder whether this is excusing myself, or offering evidence of an unpaid bill. Perhaps sometimes something must be said. Wives are often telling husbands this.

My in laws have been more than welcoming. We play cards, watch football, celebrate holidays, share meals, visits and attend sports events together. Now and then I'll even help to fix something.

And then there's the immense gratitude for all the people in this community who leave me alone! When my wife was a kid, she recalls having to climb a tree in order to read a book out of the reaches of her Yahoo siblings. This world can be a hard place for an introvert. And yet, Appalachians naturally honor them. They leave them be. And they often regard their oddities with the same sort of reverence the Amish have for their dwarfs. They are regarded as special aspects of God. To live alone for many years is not 'creepy' nor anti-social. It is simply a life style some gravitate to, naturally. And if you should happen upon them, the cultural sense here is that like some odd, ragged dwarf or crone one encounters along the road in a fairy tale – if you treat them well and with respect, they might leave you with a valuable (magical) object (insight).

In the same way, the community is rather hands-off on a

neighborhood level as to how one manages their home and yard, what one parks on the street, and what one parks in their back yard. Oh, a neighbor might grumble to themselves or another neighbor. But nothing is done. Envy can flutter its black wings through the neighborhood like bats. However, whether you work hard, earn a living, or sit about watching the day pass is grumbling material also – but nothing to be sanctioned. Being a writer makes me interesting and very comfortable, as they are not readers – but come with a natural esteem for anyone who can get their words printed. So, they are the best of all worlds: people who admire writers, but don't bother to read or discuss what they say. It's an eternal honeymoon with all of the recognition, but none of the audience.

Positive Externalities

When economists drink with mystics,
positive externalities is what they discuss.
Just as a rising tide lifts all boaters,
when my neighbors shoot their burglars –
others motor past. And in turn, their homes
assess higher, when I mow my grass.
My flu shot protects others, somewhat.
And when I walk the carpet barefoot
my downstairs neighbor enjoys his sleep.

Virtue bleeds kindnesses that get tracked all over.
And mystics, who study positive externalities specifically,
claim the majority of us lie outside our bodies.
That our shine is reflected in our shoes.
That whatever you say, echoes.
That good Karma promotes better neighborhoods,
better sex – and better meals, they might add.

Life coaches often recommend maintaining an “attitude of

gratitude". It says something that they have to recommend it as a discipline. It doesn't seem to come easily. Religious leaders struggle to inculcate gratitude in their followers. The impulse is something to be attained, it would seem. It is often more natural to bite the hand that feeds us, or at least to whine and complain so that like a puppy, we must be first paper trained and then to "take it outside". Or, we are raised with such a blend of love and respect that we naturally reflect it. Perhaps, but my guess is that this also still requires a bit of discipline and yelling.

Gratitude comes with a feeling of awe; that we have been blessed. Gratitude requires a religious experience. Out of nowhere, we are given something of great value, unearned. All of us have been born. But until we are 'born again', we haven't the experience. Sometimes it isn't easy to see life as a great blessing. We are just dumb, suffering animals trying to shelter ourselves from all of the difficulties which pelt us. And to surmount these difficulties, we've had to observe the world rather dispassionately, as a welter of problems to be solved. Gratitude might come with time, but a simple objective look at the problem, free from bitterness and acrimony is an effective starting point. "You'll learn to like it," God might have said. "More practice," the Buddha might add.

As an animal, we are designed to solve problems. Working problems is what brings us fulfillment and happiness. Solved problems on the other hand are like a sugar burst; magic which comes with a snag, a downside rebound. The more fun the going up, the worse the coming down. Happiness which is not powered by work is like a drug which loses its potency with use. If a person were to ask me what they should do with their life, I would ask them what problems they like to solve? I certainly wouldn't ask them if they would like drinking cold beer on a Mexican beach, or driving a sports car, wearing expensive clothes or being loved by lots of beautiful women. These

sorts of answers wave to them all the time from billboards, anyway.

Writers can sprinkle happy thoughts over their work like powdered sugar. But nutritionally, the sweetness in words should come from their context. And where do humans find their context, but in work; the effort to solve problems, in the grit and slog of everyday existence. So that looking at the life around oneself in terms of problems seems not only natural to do, but the most authentic way to speak.

To write about my neighbors in all compliments would be like feeding you doughnuts or speaking in all flowery italics. The Progressives do this day after day, selling the community quick energy Empowerment Bars from an ideological 7-11. Whereas the real awe, the real gratitude for living around here comes from eating the real experiences, and getting one's nutrition from it. And the real experiences around here are the problems, struggled with individually, which can pester the most afflicted like smarms of horseflies. Perhaps gratitude comes with a dollop of sympathy for those who seem to always f*ck up. And the first step towards sympathy is to pay attention, which I try to do.

Writers screw it up, too, though. It's not so easy to get it correct.

"The Lilies of the Field"

The Good Life is in *not* having everything the way you want it,
but in this manner – everything must be just so.

It's not contrary
to find just that person
you want to disagree with
over the long haul;

seasoned with just the bickering
you enjoy.

Nor is it easy landing that occupation
with just the right level of complexity, pay and
frustration
to hold your interest through that day, the next,
the next week, that next year...

And then, to be delivered those letters to toss,
invitations to dismiss,
the right laws to disobey,
just the right amount of inconvenience
to make doing something about it
feel good,
and just the right amount of injustice to right,
with enemies of such specific and delicious odiousness,
they should make a movie of it!

There is really no end to the “lilies of the field” because
if the truth be known,
they are weeds, you know.

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Carl Nelson is currently working on a book of memoirs and poetry celebrating his current area of Appalachia titled *Become Remarkable*. To see more of his work, please visit [Magic Bean Books](#).

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