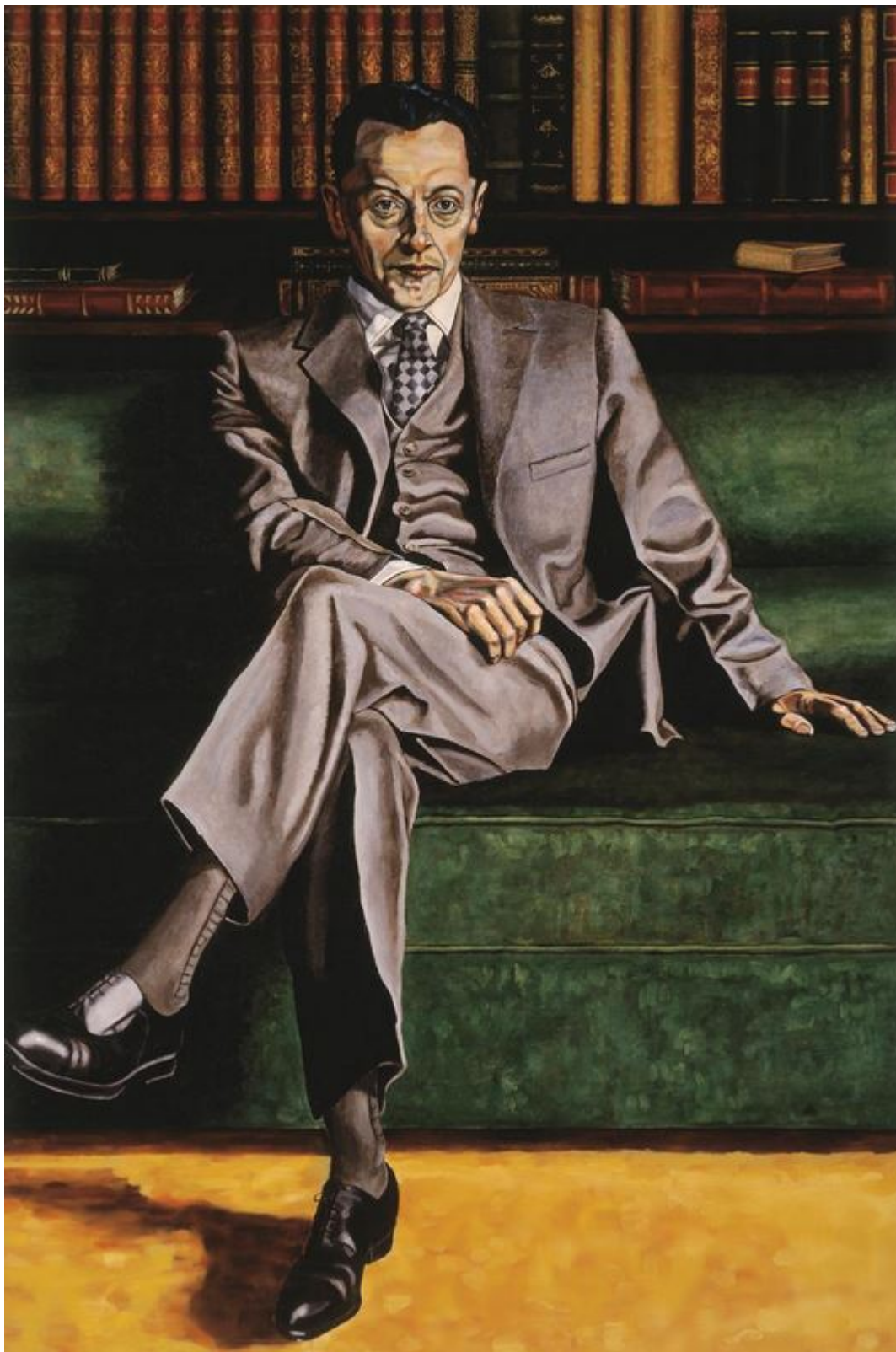


Neat versus Messy

by [Carl Nelson](#) (August 2023)



Man in Green Suit, Anne Hoenig, 1995

When I first met my wife's knee surgeon at her pre-surgical evaluation, I was a bit leery. The place was a surgical machine. A dozen replacements, done on an outpatient basis, made a day's work. The doctor wore prominent gold jewelry, a pinstriped suit, pink silk tie, tasseled blue leather loafers with white piping, and a boutonniere. My wife's background is sales, and all these accoutrements of success register with her. They also registered with me, but in another direction. Whereas I saw in our surgeon's accoutrements someone who might be more motivated by the fee than the treatment possibilities, my wife saw a man who was proud of his success and had a great attention to detail (especially with the white piping). My wife's discernment proved to be the better.

Following up a bit on the fellow via the internet, my wife noted the numerous professional organizations he was a member of, a founding member of, and indeed president. He had a charitable arm and travelled yearly to perform surgical procedures for the needy. He had a long list of written publications within his field, and had built his own surgical practice organization. There was no mention of a family, but did note that a favorite pastime of his was pursuing efficiencies in workflow.

Indeed, the fellow was very detail oriented and passed through the recovery area often. His conversations and updates were short, succinct, but warm. His post op instructions were quite detailed, gone over carefully with us by a nurse, carefully printed out and highlighted. Basically, what I found was that with an outpatient surgical operation, you take the hospital home with you. The pain protocols, medication timing, detailed physical rehab, wound care, nutrition, physical assistance and use and placement of all of the appliances ... all of these formerly hospitalized activities are handed off and born by the patient and their caregivers. To wit, the physician's organizational diligence is very important. And I have to say,

our experience has gone with nary a hitch.

All of which has caused me to reflect. (Granted, just about anything may do that.)

When I was in medical school, I did fine until I began trying to fly on my own. It was like being pushed in a little boat off into a vast sea. The truth of medicine is that doctors heal very little. What they do is to stabilize the patient in a tenable position for nature to take its course. For example, they remove the knife, tie off the bleeders, sterilize the wound and then seal it off so that the natural bodily capabilities are sufficient to heal. It's the same with antibiotics. The doctor finds out what the organism is susceptible to, and does everything in their power to make the patient less susceptible. But the body heals itself. To cross an ocean, or to survive a storm at sea, you must be quite focused. Successful physician's minds, as I imagine them, are like innumerable overlays of rational actions, of focused flow charts, and great banks of data. They are like a great library, which to be utilized, one must focus on how to locate the specific information needed. Most professions require focused minds. Physicians, especially, can be under great pressure at times to focus in order to produce results.

My natural state is unfocused. Moreover, I'm a deeply introverted thinker. Introverted thinkers tend to rely on long term memory rather than the short term, so that an unexpected, initial situation will often catch us flatfooted. I'm often five to ten minutes into any discussion before an appropriate thought occurs. Initially, I feel embarrassingly stupid and quite the idiot. Finally, I wonder why none of the others had considered what then seems so apparent? And then why my comment would strike them as so strange as to start a whole ancillary discussion itself?

School and tests are natural focusing agents, however. When I needed an answer, all I had to do was choose from four or five offerings, if multiple choice, or from a long-term memory buffet of what the course offered if a written reply were needed. But when the real world came at me, the possibilities were overwhelming! The successful physician has been taught how and where to focus initially, and then to maintain one's focus as they proceed down a mental flow chart of possible paths. Success is achieved gradually as the patient responds more and more to the therapeutic actions—practical science, really.

I simply could not hold more than the most introductory thought protocols in mind. My thinking refuses sustained structuring. (Albeit in a very polite way. I just stare dumbfounded, until something occurs.) My mind seems to treat much of what it's learned as uninteresting, and all that it doesn't know as a fascinating mystery. (I've a thinly detailed knowledge base.) So that when I observed a patient and their presentation, my mode of action – after proceeding through the admitting protocols—was to stare until something came to mind. This is an excellent way to think—as a poet—but an absolutely terrifying way to go about things as a physician. By the time I was into my fourth year as a medical student it was very plain to me that my chosen career path was just not going to work—and might end terribly.

So, the reason I dwelled somewhat upon my wife's surgeon's dress was that it resurrected an argument I've had with those who judge people (such as me!) as harshly by their manner and appearance as I perhaps judge them. I would agree that most likely my wife's surgeon's presentation demonstrated confidence and attention to detail. Likewise his success certainly demonstrates focus.

“The opposite of a poet,” Yeats declared, “is an opinionated

man.”

And if we were to look upon opinion from the viewpoint of reality, it would be analogous to focus. Focus is the opinion an actor has of the scene. Focus is necessary for a person to act. But focus can prevent a person from perceiving. To be a good poet necessitates one work in a rather unfocused state so that disparate notions might do a meet and greet—possibly to find common ground. One of the greatest difficulties I have with traditional poetry is that its focused structure most often creates a sentimental verse—that is, one in which the finding is subsidiary to the structure. And it seems to me that the best ‘structure’ of a poem is the one which most naturally conforms to the feeling of the language itself, so that whatever can be said is said best. Something best said near always finds its tune. A poet must be unfocused because their usefulness is in uniting contradictions. This work doesn’t often pay well, but nevertheless is very useful to a society, I maintain. An enormous amount of effort (and struggle) can be saved by seeing things a bit differently.

Common Ground

At Camden pool I know this fellow who swims very fast. I call him Rabbit while he calls me Turtle. Today I caught him out of breath at the end of his lane. “Hi, Rabbit,” I greeted him.

“I swim very fast so that it’s over sooner,” he rasped. I replied, “I swim very slowly so that it doesn’t seem to be happening at all.”

I think we are finding common ground.

Common ground, like gold,

is where you find it.
Common ground has a look
different from other soil.
It's rather like the left side of the holler
discovering the right,
or a bee discovering the flower,
a stream finding its bed,
or a fire leaping to its wood
with the comforting sound of puzzle pieces
snapping into place,
to leave our faces glowing with recognition,
as if the winners at hide and seek.

When friends call during the day and I pick up the phone at my desk to answer, they often wonder if they have caught me sleeping?

"No," I reply, "I'm here working (up since seven) and often sound like this when I'm working."

My work entails writing the next thing which occurs to me, following the latter. To do this, I work in a very unfocused mental state, somewhat like that located midway between awake and sleep. The focus I utilize is in the feeling. I choose a feeling within which to explore, something like a color. And then I start with a small thought, often a common one, and discover what metaphors come streaming in out of the vacancy to attach. Metaphors are the great matchmakers of the intellect, joining ideas or details in a fruitful union. There is nothing like them for getting that conversation off the stolid, prosaic humdrum and into the air. To me, this is a poet's work—and if it happens to fashion a nice verse, so much the better. And, often times, natural combinations marry to a natural rhythm – which is the very best.

Bringing this back to where I began by discussing my wife's

surgeon-poets also often have a particular look. Disarray might figure heavily, which is reflective of a working mental state. The working area is often stuffed with books and papers, sentimental items, dust... lying in a vortexual arrangement to the poet. His dress is haphazard, comfortable, and habitual, perhaps from items worn, moth-eaten or torn. His hair might well be askew, his chin bristly. My own hair sprouts all over the place and my eyebrows in the latter part of life are sprouting these superhairs which claw like vines towards attachment (in my fancy) to some greater thing. My wife nearly salivates in her desire to snip them. But they feel right! It is important to appear as what one feels is authentic: so the surgeon, and so myself. Likewise, I like my neighborhood to be modest. (My lack of funds handles this quite readily.) I want the place I live to prioritize the whimsical and lovely, and to veer from conspicuous consumption. I work on both aspects.

For the focused mind, cause and effect are the ways we link with our neighbor. Either I smack them, or they smack me in a continuing cause and effect narrative; accounting for everything they imagine, including success ... including God.

For the poetic mind, each and every idea, fact ... animal, mineral, or vegetable is joined to another through metaphor, which is rather like holding hands with the fingers of one hand neatly fitting into the webbing of another. Such is how poetry collects the world in a basket.

If you want to get somewhere, you will have to break a lot of eggs, so perhaps the focused mind is for you. But if you'd like to live somewhere happily—perhaps hatching a lot of eggs through a poetic incubation might serve you better. And you needn't dress up to do so, so no dry cleaning bills!

Add a Pinch of Poetry to Your Day

Don't get carried away,
but a pinch of poetry
can go a long way towards
seasoning a bland day.

That pothole which nearly broke the car's axle
needs a memorial this morning
exactly the size of a haiku.

A rose by any other name, today,
would smell just like your secretary,
Betty Lou.

That the sun rose is no great thing,
but that it shines upon you is fortuitous.
Poetry, as well, is
personally miraculous.

Face it, a little of the flaneur gives you a rise,
like yeast in a batch of dough.
Unseen to others, metaphor creates engagement,
a secretive tryst with whatever you pass,
to meet later around the corner.

[Table of Contents](#)

Carl Nelson has recently finished a book of poetry titled, *Self-Assembly*, which will be published shortly, and from which the above poetry has been selected. To see this and more of his work, please visit [Magic Bean Books](#).

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)