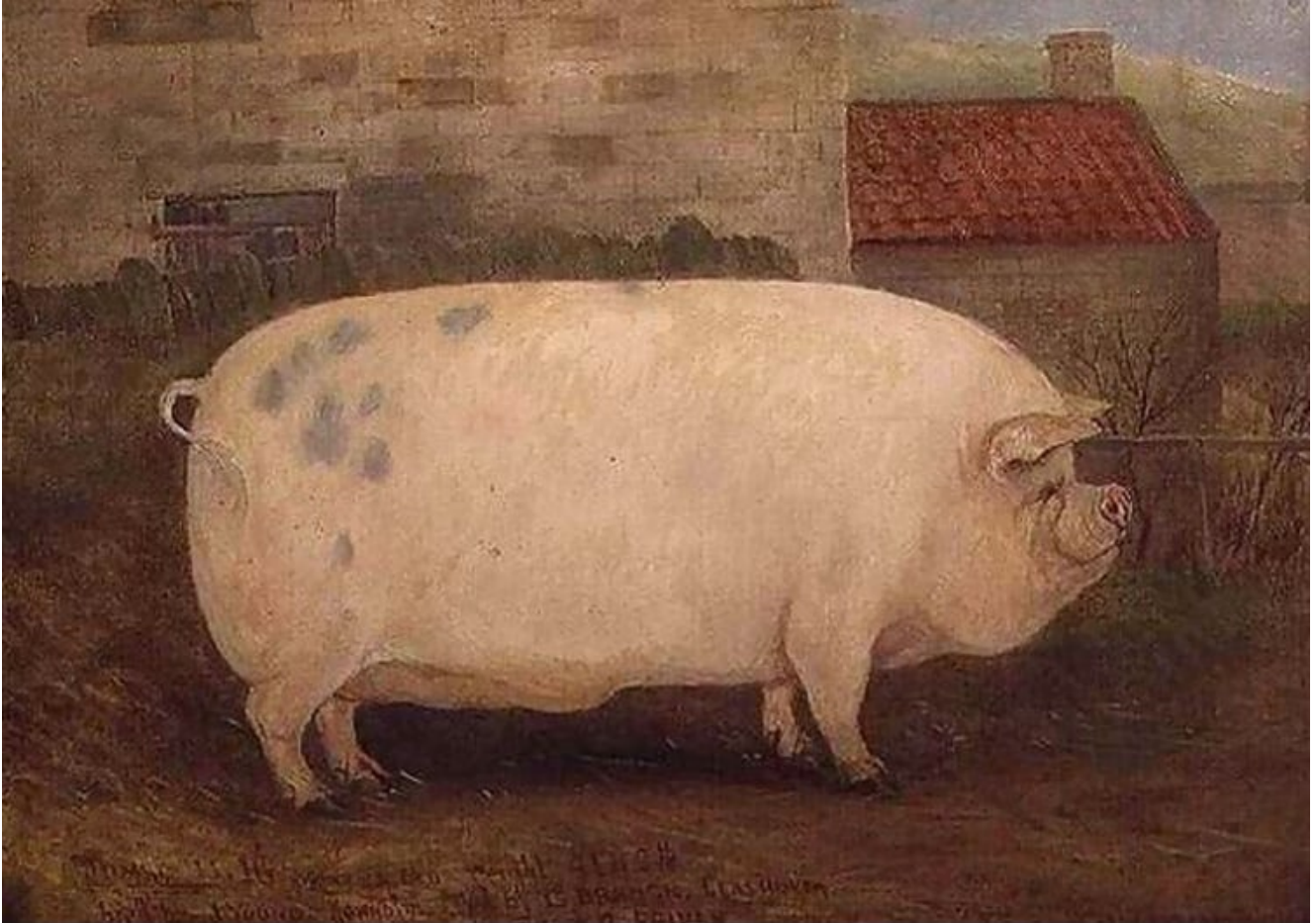


On Being Included

by [Carl Nelson](#) (July 2024)



Jumbo 16 months old 41 stone bred by J Young Newholm
Yorkshire, William Henderson (1886)

In case you haven't figured it out yet, Pilgrim, we don't choose what we love in this life. The only choice we're offered is whether we will accept it. It took me a little over 40 years—and then, the work had just begun.

But, a word to the wise ... you'll be offered either the good

or the bad news first. If you always take the bad news first, your life will get better. There's no other way around it. Eat your vegetables. –Notes on a very wide gravestone

One of the curious behaviors of my mother in law, is to be gazing out the car window, and then in the midst of anyone's conversation—no matter what is going on—she'll point and say, "What is that?" And not in a tone that will allow itself to be put off. It might be some rock in a field. Nevertheless, she'll ask as if it's our duty to know, or to find out.

My wife and sister in law, who are currently enlisted in her care, find this both humorous (the levity arriving much later) and irritating.

This is certainly curious behavior, especially, when combined with the imperiousness of the request. But she suffers from senility, and isn't always clear about the world. So there's that.

One of the uses of living a long life is that realizations which can take decades to reveal themselves will suddenly turn on that dusty bulb in your head. For example, one afternoon years ago when my great aunt Em overnighted at my home in Seattle, (a rare and singular—and not particularly sought, on her part—experience) I took the opportunity to ask what my mother had been like as a child. My great aunt Em, (orphaned at eight and shipped by train to a Midwest farm), whose carriage and nature was nevertheless that of a decent, caring person—but one who had seen a lot of a hard world—suddenly looked quite stern and a bit grim while stating quite emphatically, that "She was the most spoiled-rotten brat you could have ever known."

I was rather taken aback, both by the harshness of the judgment (I could see mom commenting as such—but not my aunt), and because my mother, as I knew her, absolutely *hated* spoiled children. As disciplinarians went, she led her German forbearers by several lengths. (In family photos all of us kids are standing upright as fire pokeres with arms held stiffly at our sides.) How did this connect?

It was something I put in the back of my mind to mull, when suddenly, while speaking with my older brother several years later, the answer occurred suddenly to me. “If we are disciplined so as to do nothing which displeases her—then she has everything as she wants it!”

“So that just occurred to you, did it?” My brother responded archly. (Let me just say here, as a disclaimer, that everyone has their good points—many times, which outweigh their deficits by several measures. And my mom had a raft of sound qualities. Nevertheless, it’s often the bad ones we are summoned to deal with. The good ones take care of themselves. [For example, mom and my future wife got along stupendously. Lynn just loved her, though she saw my mother quite clearly.])

But back to my mother in law:

Again the clarity which comes with a long life has revealed the answer to her curious behavior. She wanted to be included. And my mother-in-law, being a rather spoiled person herself, wanted to be included within the conversation on her terms. It’s irritating, but tyrants will have their needs also. And while I could make a good case for the petty, greedy, attention grasping, and irritating nature of this vexing personality tick—I recognize, all the while, that I embrace a bit of the (despotic) practice myself.

When I feel a group has continued a bit long without my input, or without acknowledging me (enough?), I will insert myself by interjecting a witticism, or a humorous aside suggested by a

remark someone made. This isn't that hard, as it's appalling how few people understand that reality is a set of trade-offs (as Thomas Sowell forever has to explain). You want more of this, you'll also get less of that. So that with a bit of a twist, it is not difficult to render a person's point of view being that of their own backside mooning them. (Another petard hoisted!)

When you make a group laugh, it is hard for them not to acknowledge it—and to include you. Alas, being included does not necessarily make one accepted. With some groups—such as a recent book group I dropped—you realize this will just not happen, because you are not acceptable. (I apparently cared nothing for their better world. Lenin's "useful idiots" really nailed them.)

My own mother would often interject herself back into the leadership of any conversation, or re-establish her direction of the conversation by saying, "Incidentally! ..." and sally off to plow new furrows, her listeners being left to follow after, smashing the clods of any inconsistency with their bare feet.

If modern culture has given us nothing else, it has produced an incredible array of costumes and garb for glossing over raw tyranny. Costumes enough to fit all!

My older, identical twin brothers are engineers, who make no attempt to include themselves in any conversation not involving engineering. Whatever else that is going on in whatever room they enter can just go pound sand, for whatever they care. Their modus operandi at a regular family gathering would be to collect around the hors d'oeuvres, tightly as a clutch of defensive linemen who had just sacked the quarterback, and to down all the fresh shrimps daubed with cocktail sauce in an eating frenzy reminiscent of barking seals. I can't believe anyone has ever, or would ever, approach them with a romantic difficulty or relationship conundrum of even a theoretical nature. But if it did happen,

I don't believe they would give them a minute's attention, unless assured the seeker had at least the minimal qualifications to describe the situation in terms of sheer forces, tensile strengths and moment arms. Bill Gates redux.

My sister, on the other hand, would insert herself (into any gathering) like a sunny field, ready to entertain near anything. But after a rich enough discussion and after several fine food dishes served (wine chilled), her thoughts would invariably lead to some real culprits, and the need for a scorched earth policy. She's a Progressive. Quite rational—maybe even on beyond rational—like if it... had metastasized. Euthanasia, abortion, eugenics, mandated vaccinations without question... it's important to explore all possibilities. "Do all these people really know, what's going on?"

And then, there's my dad, who struggled mostly not to be included.

My father would respond to any conversational advance as if it were court room testimony and give short responses, not wandering from the question or divulging any more information than was asked—then speedily head for the weather, or show you a joke from the comic section of his newspaper. They're out to get you, is how he might phrase it; no reason to help them.

My father never wanted to know me much. In fact, I mentioned this fact to him one time during a car ride. I said, "You know. You're going to get older and older and older ... and finally die—and never get to know me. Never get to know what I am about!"

To which he replied, laughing, as if it were a cheerful notion. "Well, that's the way it goes."

I just shake my head. But then as we age, the waters clear, and we begin to—or at least, begin to think—we see things more as they were (are). The reason, it appears, my father didn't

want to know me, is because he already did. He knew me all too well, without us even speaking (just as I do him). We understand each other genetically. And I can almost hear the humor in his unspoken look. "The whole reason for you being here—is that I was trying to upgrade." But my brothers were engineers, and quite good at it (like Bell Labs quality), so he made out well.

(Ironically, I'd hazard my older brothers' estimate of dad mirrored dad's estimate of me. But they seemed to see some odd value in me and an intelligence which dad seemed unable to grasp. Perhaps it was the generational gap. But, I'll just thank them for that.)

On the other hand, dad was always good to me. And I'm reminded of the advice our son sought from the monks in the temple he swept daily which was nearby his Thai orphanage—regarding him being orphaned. "It is enough that you were born."

So, I put all of this into my mental mixer, and just the other day, I gave my friend Marty a story I'd recently finished.

He said he liked it. "I like your story. Interesting how it's rendered in two parts. The unexpected ending comes down like a hatchet. Question: when you say "a long string of girlfriends," are you bragging, complaining, or merely reporting?"

"Searching for the right woman so that you can quit all of the nonsense can be exhausting. So, maybe complaining," I replied.

He liked that.

A bit of time before I finally did meet my wife to be, I saw a picture of a woman performing a yoga move in which she had contorted herself to look like a crab moving sideways. I taped it above my desk. "That's my Muse," I exclaimed to myself and others, who saw it.

"I used to do that all over the gym floor in high school," my wife would remark later, after we'd met.

I first met my wife the week the Berlin Wall fell. The night of our rehearsal dinner, the Northern Lights appeared over Marietta, Ohio—which was a first, for a town this far south and in the semi-tropics. Then, the first morning of our honeymoon, it snowed. All this was a very curious stream of events. I later learned that my wife had trained her cat to do a backward somersault. In fact, that she could train cats. The day her cat didn't return, while doing Transcendental Meditation, she saw exactly where it lay dead. The next day, she walked directly to that spot in a neighborhood one half mile away, far from wherever my wife would have imagined her or the cat ever going, and recovered the poor thing.

In short, the women, and the marriage lane I was headed down, had gotten spooky and spookier. How would I cope?

Why don't people flee discomforts? Indeed, why don't they flee life?

I would posit the answer to that question lies in the observation that all of life is a tyranny. It harkens back to Melville's "universal thump" and surely much back further back in time than that—like forever:

"The old sea captains ...may thump and punch me about, " says the protagonist, Ishmael, in the first chapter (of *Moby Dick*).

"I have the satisfaction of knowing that it is all right; that everybody else is one way or another served in much the same way—either physical or metaphysical point of view, that is; and so the universal thump is passed around."

It's a marriage, to be sure! So finally...

My wife exercises her own need to be included, by joining, and when unable, challenging whoever holds the dais. She has a

very male, competitive manner of forcing inclusion, i.e. closing the deal. She doesn't wheedle her way in, like many females, via encouragement. It's a matter of pride for her that she was never a cheerleader ("for those knuckleheads out there, losing?").

I've often ground my teeth over my wife, who would seem to have to toss sand into small talk (over the most trivial matter), rather than to grease the wheel of amicability—such as the other day, when it was over a pig. We had been chatting away, and I mentioned in passing a neighboring home my wife had pointed to, which was for sale again. "They can't seem to keep anyone in it," she observed.

"Well, it housed a pretty good pig," I remarked.

"What do you mean?"

"The people who rented the place, some tenants past, had a pig."

"What do you mean?"

"What do you mean, what do I mean?"

"How big of a pig?"

"Well, it was BIG. Actually, a hog."

"But how big?"

"Hog big."

"How big?"

I wagged my head from left-to the right while at the wheel, trying to indicate its length.

(My wife maintains now that if I were to have mentioned that it was Potbelly Pig, big—the whole matter would have been made plain then, and there. But, sigh—and again here, it's my

fault—I hadn't.)

"So, like, HOG big," I repeated.

And it was then I could foresee those first storm clouds forming on the horizon. This wasn't going away...

She just glared.

"How the hell would I know exactly how big their hog was? Like how much it weighed? I saw it from the street. It would walk around back, when it wasn't inside."

"Inside?"

"Yes! That's what I'm telling you."

"Well, you don't have to get so sore about it! You said they had a hog-sized pig. You never said anything about it staying inside, and I all I wanted to know was how big."

"Okay. This is enough."

Whatever the wandering charms of the conversation we were having, they were quickly being chewed alive by some parasitic Gradgrind Hogism which commanded my wife's brain.

"For Goodness sakes! Can we get off the pig thing, please? Because it was just BIG. Like you would expect a HOG, to be." I let out a long exasperated sigh. "You want weights? and measures? Like I was carrying a scale and tape measure at the time?"

"No. I just wanted an idea of how big a pig...

It was a BIG. BIG, BIG! BIG!! BIG!!! PIG, PIG, PIG!!!!!" I screamed. "No. I correct that," I whispered softly, totally deflated, "...HOG."

This is how things can go. And for those of you who are clucking their tongues at our relationship, I will just re-

refer you to the epigram above. I'm not going to apologize for the Universe and the Universal Thump, or whatever. Go suck eggs, if you don't like it—or would fault me, for it.

"Why does this pig matter, anyway?" She asks, finally, bewildered, following several minutes of silence.

(Which is my stand, precisely!) And we reach common ground—finally—like two shipwrecked conversants.

Sigh.

Today at lunch we were discussing political matters and I noted that if you look at the decline in this country's practice of fiduciary responsibility (a measure from which most other evils spring), the decline very nearly matches women's influence on the national scene. Now there seems the belief that we can just print money to pay for everything, while *surprise!* Biden's most ardent supporters are young single women, with Taylor Swift being their poster child. (Coincidence?)

"I'm not like that," she said.

'Not now,' I thought. But I recalled how when we first met, her outstanding bills mounded on the dining room table. "You're just wasting your money paying them before they're due," she'd retort and had a lot of other glib answers to my timid suggestions.

"It takes a superior mind to cope with chaos," she'd reply to all of my burgeoning concerns.

"Yes," I'd answered. "And it takes an inferior mind to create it."

It wears me out to think of all the time, the strategies I'd employed, the arguments employed to convince that woman to do those simple things which can stabilize any relationship. To wit: Don't spend more than you make. Do what you've said

you'll do. Be on time. Quit delegating. The list goes on... but all just reasonable stuff. Which I was interrupted in the midst of my reminiscences, by my wife who noted, "Do you know what I did, years ago, which has held our marriage together?"

This was a rhetorical question. So I waited.

"I decided I would take the advice written in the Bible about the duties of the husband and wife, and decided to let the man be the head of the family." She nodded primly.

So into this fractious ether, this most curious of creatures, my wife reaches, opens The Book—and clutches the Gold Ring.

All of which keeps me addressing the stars at night with a bit of wonder, maybe for a heads up—a little input! even. But all those vast, empty skies would seem to whisper is...

"It is enough that you were born."

[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](#)