

THE CHRONIC DIARIES

Vol. 1

Mississippi Chris Sharp

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*To my bride of 30 years.
Thank you, Debbie, for a wonderful life together.*

*A sincere thank you to Charlene Dye
who freely and graciously undertook
the editing of the first 200 pages of this book.
Were I to ask her to do the rest of it,
she would, such a wonderful person is she!*

*Thanks to all those with whom I share CLL and other types of Cancer,
to all those health professionals who have so diligently looked after me,
and to all those who had a story and were willing to share.*

*Thanks to all those whose photographs I borrowed, stole or otherwise appropriated.
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*Anyone can write a book if they'll just get started.
You work at it for a while, and pretty soon, you can't stop!*

Chris Sharp, Porterville, Mississippi, October 30, 2010

*Thank You!!
Chris Sharp*

*I was diagnosed with Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia in October of 2008. Below, I write about some of my experiences with this new event in my life. As far as I am able, the facts as they pertain to my CLL are presented here, but they may be occluded behind the cloudy substance of human experience and recollection. If you want to learn more about the clinical mechanisms of CLL and the means by which it is treated, **you will not learn much from this blog**. I suggest you visit www.clktopics.org, which certainly has been and continues to be a beneficial site for me. There are other sites as well. There is literally a mountain of information for a CLL patient to misinterpret when he is searching the web for information without any supervision. One can depress himself right to the point of death. Be careful what you read! Being thus warned, read on at your discretion. My goal here is to inform my near and distant family, friends, and fans of my status, and to do that in a manner that is, hopefully, an entertaining read. If any one feels so inclined, drop me an e-mail, most particularly if you also have CLL and something you read here was beneficial to you.*

Though they are thinly disguised, real people are written about within this blog. If you want to learn how ONE person is thinking about the personal-human experience that is CLL, then read on with the understanding that somewhere, between the facts and the experiences I write about herein, lies the truth . . . sometimes sacrificed on the altar of bruised and jaded perception. The list of things I don't know is very long . . . the list of things I am sure of is getting shorter and shorter. You are welcome, if you choose, to stay here a while.

12/16/08 Update to My Physician Friend, Frank, in Memphis

Hello, Frank! I hope you are well.

I thought I would give you an update on my situation—the good news, and the not so good news.

I am doing my best to be stoic and have been remarkably successful, I think. Before giving you a complete rundown, let me say that I have gone from STOP to WARP SPEED on learning as much as I can about this disease.

I am a quick study and have always known how to find information. Unfortunately, the world of genetics and genetic research, as it applies to medicine, can be very obfuscating for the layman. I don't fully understand all that I now know, and don't fully know what I think I understand. One thing I do know is that in THIS cancer, TYPICAL is a hard target. I suppose that is true in all cancers since our genetics are so PERSONAL (that may be an understatement!).

My hematologist/oncologist is recently out of medical school. He went to the University of Mississippi medical school and served residencies in both Hematology and Oncology in Jackson. He seems to know most all of the latest things, and I have been mostly confident in the care that I have received from him. I like him a lot.

Please indulge me while I try to explain to you my condition. I will probably get a few things wrong, which you as a medical professional will no doubt spot right away. My telling it like this is for my own edification as well as informing you. You can read between the lines and interpret. I am not asking for free medical advice. You offered yourself as a platform, so I am climbing aboard!

After my initial diagnosis of CLL, my doctor placed me in a stage 2 category, and ordered a FISH (fluorescence in situ hybridization) test and a full body CT scan.

The results of the standard FISH test showed no chromosomal abnormalities, but then the standard FISH only looks for an 11q deletion, 13p deletion, Trisomy 12 and 17p deletion. I had hoped that I would have the most favorable type of CLL, which is the 13p deletion, the most indolent kind. Some folks who have this type never require any treatment at all, and those who do respond well to the front-line chemotherapies. I was not so lucky.

But then, I was not so UN-lucky as to have an 11p deletion, or even worse, the 17p deletion.

FISH showing no abnormalities placed me with about 20% of all folks who have CLL. The length of time to treatment, treatment response rates and survival times for no FISH abnormalities and Trisomy12 are about the same, which is about halfway between the worst case and the best case scenarios. Then, I learned that just because FISH did not reveal anything WORSE does not mean that in the future, something WORSE will not be made manifest!

When they told me I needed the full body CT scan, and the doctor said he wished that he had an earlier one to be able to compare the two, I told him that I had had one done a couple of years earlier, as ordered by a different doctor for a different reason. They were able to find that CT scan. The BAD news is that there is swelling of the lymph nodes in my armpits and groin, and my spleen is enlarged. The GOOD news is that in two years there has been basically no change in the elapsed period between the two CT scans.

The BAD news is that my lymph nodes and spleen were enlarged two years ago and that I have had this cancer for more than two years. (While I respect and admire the work of radiologists, why didn't they see that on the first CT scan and alert someone?)

Let's see: If I am a normal karyotype, stage 2, and the median survival rate for a person with CLL of this description is 7 to 10 years after diagnosis, and I am at least 2, perhaps 3 years into this, maybe MORE, then suddenly things seem a bit more urgent. "Watch and Wait" is becoming "Watching, HELL! WORRYING is more like it!"

But wait, there's more!! (I quoted the late, great Ron Popeil there!) I then learned about mutations or lack thereof in the Immunoglobulin Heavy Chain Variable Region Gene (IgVH). Now one would think that the MUTATED gene would be bad, right? Well, that's wrong. CLL cells with the MUTATED gene are barely alive. They are weak, Caspar Milquetoast, compared to the more robust, rowdy, and obstreperous NONMUTATED IgVH gene CLL cells. A good comparison between the two would be Ernest Borgnine as juxtaposed to Charles Nelson Riley, or perhaps Paul Lynde. These unmutated cells are more aggressive and do not respond well to chemotherapy. The IgVH test is very sophisticated and is only done in a few research hospitals and is VERY expensive. However, it is the ultimate indicator of aggressive CLL and indicates a poor prognosis and a more aggressive treatment regime. "Watch and Wait" is not indicated here.

They discovered a protein that inhabits the surface of CLL cells, called CD38. It seems that MOST people who are CD38 POSITIVE also have the unmutated IgVH gene. This test is not expensive and is routinely done.

Well, the GOOD news is that I am CD38 NEGATIVE. The BAD news is that there are a lot of blown tests, and even if the test is properly done, CD38 can CHANGE over the course of the disease.

It turns out that there is another test for a different protein, which may inhabit the surface of CLL cells. That protein is called ZAP-70. Patients with a ZAP-70 Expression of <20% are considered NEGATIVE. Patients with a ZAP-70 expression of >20% are considered POSITIVE. It also turns out that studies have indicated that ZAP-70 POSITIVE patients have a 96% chance of having the UNMUTATED IgVH gene. ZAP-70 Positive is a poor prognosticator.

The GOOD news is that this test allows one to know that he has a more aggressive type of CLL and allows his physicians the luxury of not fooling around with the front-line chemotherapies, like chlorambucil, which mostly won't work and can cause ZAP-70 positive patients to become refractory to this and even OTHER chemotherapies.

The BAD news is that my doctor indicated that they don't run this test because it is so expensive.

The GOOD news is that they immediately agreed to run this test for me after I came up off the examination table, rose to my full height, and in the voice, I use to clearly and competently reinforce my authority in directing my men when we are working on hazardous equipment in energized electrical substations, demanded that they do so. Indicating that it USED to be expensive as recently as two years ago but can now be done by many commercial labs using standard flow cytometry, I handed him the name and phone number of a lab that would perform this test on a blood sample for \$75.00.

The GOOD news is that upon further investigation, they indicated that the regular labs they use, for tests they don't do in-house, are able to do this test inexpensively. How many CLL patients in this clinic do you think might receive better care in the future? I hope I did some good.

The BAD news is that I lost quite a bit of confidence in my doctor since he seemed relatively unaware of what a LAYMAN was able to determine is an important new tool as a prognostic and treatment selection indicator.

The BAD news is that he indicated to me that CLL was not the only type of cancer he dealt with, and that sometimes it could be confusing with so much new information on so many different fronts.

The GOOD news is that he is now very plainly aware that his patients are not the least bit interested in what he may know about cancers other than theirs, and more than casually interested in what he may not know about the malevolent disease that inhabits their own body

The GOOD news is that he can recover this lost confidence if he continues to respond to the treatments I have been providing! He has an excellent prognosis for a full recovery and is going to stay a part of my team.

The GOOD news is that he readily agreed that I should seek a second opinion, but then, doctors are trained that way, aren't they?

I had decided that I was satisfied with the WATCH-AND-WAIT form of treatment and that I would seek a second opinion when it was time for treatment. My acute lymphocyte doubling time has yet to be established, and this is another indicator of when treatment may become necessary. At this time, it appears (to me) that my doubling time is going to be less than one year, which is not good. However, as a layman familiar with mathematical forecasts as related to business and statistics, I may be extrapolating in a manner that is not *medically* prudent. My doctor does not seem to think this is the case, yet, and this IS something he is very familiar with.

Then, more BAD news! I am ZAP-70 positive.

The GOOD news is that this got me off my arse and made me get busy with seeking that second opinion, since this single, important, indicator is telling me that WATCH-AND-WAIT may not be for me.

The GOOD news is that I had previously found the CLL Consortium, which consists of the Dana Farber Cancer Institute (Harvard), Johns Hopkins, Ohio State Univ. Medical Center, The Mayo Clinic, UC San Diego Medical Center, Long Island Jewish Hospital, and Big-As-Texas Cancer Center. All have divisions which have bound themselves together and specialize in doing

research on CLL. Access to one of these gives a patient access to everything that is happening at ALL of them, through their affiliation.

The GOOD news is that ALL of those CLL Consortium centers are preferred provider organizations under my health insurance!

The GOOD news is that, after already reading everything I could about this for future reference (Watch-and-Wait), I was able to get busy immediately. Everything I could read seemed to point, foremost, to Big-As-Texas Cancer Center, and in particular, to a certain physician there [*henceforth known as Dr. Gooday*], as the number one physician in the number one place on the planet for the cutting edge of CLL treatment.

The GOOD news is that Big-As-Texas Cancer Center has a patient self-referral form on-line one can fill out.

The GOOD news is that I filled it out.

The GOOD news is that after I had filled it out, I was doing some further reading when I stumbled across a web page that had Dr. Gooday's e-mail address, and the Lord's voice, so gentle in my ear, said, "Send him an e-mail."

The GOOD news is that I was obedient to that voice and drafted and sent that e-mail.

The GOOD news is that about two hours later, the secretary of that Dr. Gooday called me and said that he had forwarded my e-mail to her.

The BAD news is that she said that is extremely difficult to get an appointment with Dr. Gooday, or to even get in for treatment at the CLL center at Big-As-Texas Cancer Center.

The GOOD news is that because of that e-mail, Dr. Gooday had instructed her to call me and set up an appointment, which bypassed all of their usual patient evaluation criteria. (Go to the head of the class!)

The GOOD news is that I go to see that certain doctor on January 8, 2009, and will be in Houston for two days. The first day is an examination and various tests. The second day, he goes over the results of the tests and recommends a therapy.

The news I get from Dr. Gooday may be GOOD or BAD, but it will be what it will be, and I will hear it, while standing on my feet.

This is a new and, most definitely, exciting adventure.

I will be at Taylor to play music on January 24. Hope to see you and Martha then.

You may share this with anyone you think prudent since I am sending you this as a friend and not under the auspices or restrictions of any patient/doctor relationship.

Merry Christmas to you and all your family.

By the way, I am feeling great!

12/21/08 And Now for Something Completely Different

Adversity introduces a man to himself.

Anonymous

Almost Christmas! Almost New Years!

I am thankful.

I am thankful for a complete physical and check out earlier in the year. Since I had never had one before, turning 51 meant that I really needed a colonoscopy. My main-most doctor scheduled one for me and I went through the ordeal (Since I was asleep, the colonoscopy itself was easy enough; the preparation, however . . .!) The colonoscopy revealed nothing, and the gastroenterologist who performed the procedure indicated that it was not necessary for another one for 10 years! I am thankful for that.

My main-most doctor (henceforth, Mainmost) then decided that I needed a stress test since I had never had one. I get sent off to the cardiologist and climb up on the treadmill. Soon, I was huffing and puffing, but as they raised the level, I was beginning to wear out. Just when I thought I could not go any more, the doctor said that he had a good test, and that I could stop if I wanted, but if I could go another 30 seconds, I would have finished the entire test. I made it that last 30 seconds but could not have gone one second more! I received hearty congratulations from those medical professionals in the testing room. No problems here. The old ticker is fine. I am thankful for that.

Mainmost's specialties are internal medicine/pulmonary/critical care/sleep medicine. Count them. This is FOUR. He is an outstanding fellow and has become a good, reliable friend. He checks out my lungs and breathing, constantly, ever since I started seeing him after visiting the sleep clinic. He treats me for obstructive sleep apnea and primary restless legs syndrome. I sleep every night on a CPAP machine and take some medicine to stop those annoying involuntary leg twitches during the night. I LOVE MY CPAP machine. It has changed my life! I am thankful for that!

Now, I always said that the time you were in the most medical danger was immediately after you were thoroughly checked out, and declared by those that make their living doing these things that you are in A-1, tip-top, grade-A condition . . . the very picture of human rosy-cheeked health. I thought to myself, "Self, I'll have to stop saying that, since it is obviously not true in my case!" I thought that too soon, for I was still within the danger zone.

What seemed to be a routine virus, sort of like the flu, but with no respiratory problems—achy, fever, sore all over, etc.—lasted over two weeks. After two weeks, I decided that I needed to see Mainmost, so I call him up and say, "I am sick!"

"Come on up," he said, "and we'll work you in."

I trudged up to his office and about fifteen minutes after I signed in, I was sitting in an examination room without having had an appointment. (See, I told you he was a friend!) The nurse took my vitals and waited patiently while I took off my jacket, took out my wallet and my keys, took off my cell phone and shoes, for a weigh-in out in the hallway. She graciously recorded a weight that was about 5 pounds lower than my actual weight, loudly declaring to all within earshot, "Mr. Sharp, you've lost a couple of pounds!" I think Mainmost sent his staff for

Dale Carnegie training. These words made me cheerful even though I was feeling awful! I am thankful for that!

When Mainmost came in, I managed to put on my worst, hang-dog face, and he immediately said, "Man, you look bad!" No Dale Carnegie training here!

"I feel bad, "I retorted. "That's why I'm here!"

He checked me out, turned my head one way and then the other, tapped on me, listened, worried about my fever, bent my legs one way and then the other, and indicated that I needed to get on over to the hospital, next door.

"What for?" I cried. "It's just a virus."

"Yes, it probably is, but right now, it's a virus presenting itself with all the signs of meningitis. We can't fool around with that. Off you go!"

Well, dammit, that was that and off I went. I am thankful for a good hospital next door to Mainmost's office. He called and set me up, and they were waiting for me when I got there.

I had never had a spinal tap before. Apparently, the only way they can accurately diagnose meningitis, or tell the difference between bacterial meningitis and the viral kind, is to draw some spinal fluid. This is unpleasant. They had to do it three times to get enough fluid. This is more than three times unpleasant; the unpleasant-ness is an exponential curve. It is tangential. It is like the Richter scale. On the first try, the doctor could draw no fluid. He had to withdraw that needle and get a larger one. We try again. Again, no fluid. We try an even larger needle. AGAIN, no fluid! I was beginning to start thinking words that I could not say in front of my mother, and they were soon going to start coming out of my mouth.

The doctor said, "You are so dehydrated, I cannot draw enough fluid with you laying flat on your belly. I am going to have to elevate the head of the table and let some fluid drain down. You must lie very still."

I had already surmised that with this needle in my spine, it would be advisable to lie very still. The head of the table slowly came up. As I reached about 60 degrees, the doctor had completed his work. He said, "I'm going to call Mainmost and send you on upstairs. You cannot leave, you are almost dead with dehydration. And, by the way, I regret that, with this elevated table, I have guaranteed you a 12-hour serious headache. You'll get over it, but you'll be thinking bad thoughts about me later." He needn't have worried.

Hmmmmmm. This virus was not so simple. Off I went to floor number four for a week.

I did not have meningitis of any description. I am thankful for that. They tested me for a legion of infectious diseases: Lyme, Tick fever, Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, HIV and Syphilis (I told them not to but they decided to slip these in anyway, regardless of my claiming complete monogamy. They sure are a suspicious lot!), toxoplasmosis, anaplasmosis, tularemia, West Nile Virus, influenza of various types, roto-condo-congo-exotica-viral strains, and so on and so forth. The list of things I did NOT have was very impressive. I am thankful for that.

As an aside, I have a friend whose wife was one-time pregnant. She went to her obstetrician, who told her that tests had revealed that there would perhaps be complications with the pregnancy because she had syphilis. She flew into a rage of denial, but the doctor said that the facts were the facts. After flying into her rage of denial, she then flew home and confronted her husband (my friend!) in, shall we say, a very forthright and frank manner. My friend then, very sorrowfully and candidly, admitted to a single indiscretion some several months earlier.

He then had to visit the hospital and name his accomplice in the local syphilis distribution plot. All immediate and otherwise extended parties were called in and tested (apparently someone in that group was a real rounder. Sleep with ONE and you technically sleep with them all!)

The results of those tests? None of them had syphilis. At this point, my friend flies into a rage of denial and flies home to confront his wife. All hell broke loose around that house. In the midst of throwing and breaking things, police visits for domestic disturbances, hair-pulling, weeping and gnashing of teeth, the obstetrician's office called to say that that there had been a mistake. Mishandling of samples, or perhaps misfiling of records, or both, or perhaps some other simple but certainly understandable human error had merely resulted in an erroneous report. The mother-to-be did not have syphilis. Sorry!

Sorry! Sorry! Sorry! That word cannot undo the damage the mistake causes. Sorry! It sounds so easy. It seems so final. It makes us feel so good about ourselves! Sorry! Sorry! Sorry! If we say it enough, we think we can erase years of angst and rancor, soothe wounds that have festered and bled, and reeked ooze. Wounds that are tender to the touch. Wounds that cannot bear the light or heat of the sun. Wounds that fester and brood and are filled with an infectious malevolence. "Sorry!" we like to say.

Her honor restored, the focus of the argument then shifted to his (my friend's) low estate. He was banished, banished for a time, but banished, nevertheless. In the midst of his dejection, he had to seek shelter elsewhere.

In time, things ameliorated themselves to the point that he was able to return home, but I suspect that the exposure of his single indiscretion served no useful purpose. They are living well, together, now, some years later, and they have two beautiful children. I am thankful for that. I know that they are, too.

I don't think, at the time, that she was thankful for the fact that she did not have syphilis. I know that he was. She had too many other things on her mind to be thankful for that.

My friend was thankful that he got to return home. I suppose the obstetrician was thankful that someone did not come down there and royally whip his ass. I hope he was! If he is not, then he certainly should be!

Now, back to the main story.

I had said that the list of things I did NOT have was impressive, and that I was thankful for that. What that meant, though, was that my diagnosis was a UVI or unknown viral infection. We normally call those things colds. After my week in the hospital, I felt better. My fever was gone, but I had NO starch. No energy. I was Caspar Milquetoast in a wet paper bag that I couldn't quite fight my way out of, though I was feeling better. I was thankful for that.

Mainmost released me to go home that Friday. I was thankful for that. That Friday was also the first presidential debate between Barack Obama and John McCain, which was held on the campus of the University of Mississippi. As a contractor for the University, I had been checked out by the secret service, was found to be a Republican in good standing and was bona-fide, and was supposed to be on stand-by for the University in the event of any electrical problems on their power distribution system. When my wife got me out to the car, my cell phone immediately rang, and someone from Ole Miss' power-line shop was on the phone. I answered a few questions, and the conversation ended. My wife asked me, while looking over the top of her glasses in that familiar and most suspicious manner, "You aren't thinking of going up there, are you?"

"No," I lied.

"Of course not," I lied again.

She gave me that knowing look that only a wife can give, and I was content to let my lie morph itself into the complete truth. I could not have driven to Oxford, Mississippi, for ANY reason. I went home and went to bed. I slowly regained my strength after that virus. In fact, I recovered better than John McCain's campaign, for which I was truly thankful. It took a while, but the pallor that everyone indicated had overtaken me faded, and my color came back. I was beginning to feel fine. I was thankful for that! (John McCain still has his pallor. I hope he feels OK.)

After all, I had recently been checked out via colonoscopy and a heart stress test, extensive pulmonary examinations, and now there was this long, long list of nasty infectious diseases that I did not have! All I had to do was recover from this nasty UVI, which I was well on my way to doing. After all, it was just a virus.

A follow up visit a month later with Mainmost yielded something that caused him more than a little concern. I had an extremely elevated white blood count [WBC]. It turns out that I had this extremely elevated WBC while I was in the hospital, but no one thought much of it. I had a nasty infection and the body's normal response would indicate that I should have a high WBC. But this was a month later and being nearly over the symptoms of the virus, that WBC should be down dramatically. It was not. It was even higher. He drew a small blood sample, smeared it under a slide, and peered at it under a microscope.

"You need to see a hematologist right away," Mainmost said. "If I call over there, do you have time to see him today?"

"Sure," I said, not liking the tone in his voice, or what he seemed to have seen under the microscope.

The phone call being made, I immediately went to see a hematologist/oncologist. Everyone was very nice there and treated me with great deference and respect. I'm thankful for that. I think Mainmost might have helped me out here, and if so, I am thankful for that, too.

The hematologist (Hemosapien) ordered blood work, and then took a sample. Just like Mainmost, he eyed my blood under a microscope, uttering the occasional, "Hmmmmmm!" as he peered and pondered. Coming up, he said, "We need to do a bone-marrow biopsy. I have the time, do you?"

"Yes," I said, not liking this even more.

There are signs all about the reception area of the oncology clinic. They warn and instruct patients about all kinds of things: "You must turn off all cell phones," "Bring all your medicines with you for each visit," "Please tell us if you are pregnant or think you might be," "Payment is due at the time services are rendered unless prior arrangements are made in advance" (can one make prior arrangements in arrears?), "We no longer accept Medicaid," "We no longer accept Tri-Care," and "Payment is YOUR responsibility."

They should add another one. It should read, "If you are here for a bone marrow biopsy and have a pistol or other weapon, with you, please check it with the receptionist." I did not have a pistol with me, but if I had, I might have considered using it.

I earlier indicated the unpleasant-ness of a spinal tap. For a fact, it is unpleasant. It's unpleasant-ness, though, is merely amateurish as compared to a bone marrow biopsy. The unpleasant-ness levels of the two can be compared to a Psychology 101 student's understanding of human mental processes as juxtaposed with a PHD'd clinical practitioner. To

the pitcher in a Tee-Ball game as compared to Roger Clemmons. To a five-year-old Suzuki method violin student as compared to Mark O'Connor. To an abacus as compared to a PC. To an alcoholic house painter as compared to a professional house painter. To a .22 as compared to a .300 Winchester Magnum. [insert your own comparisons here].

At first, Hemosapien gave me a local anesthetic, "Now this is going to sting a little bit." This small but sharp pain was going to help me through a period of a much larger pain. I was thankful for this minor discomfort. On reflection, though, it seems ironic that Hemosapien warned me about the minor discomfort and sting of the administration of the local anesthetic, while failing to give me any indication of what I was ABOUT to undergo. After the local had taken effect, Hemosapien crawled up on the examination table with me. Placing a nurse at each shoulder to hold me down, it seems, I should have been suspicious. He went to work on my hip, drilling with a hand drill, a hole that would just fit the circular circumference of a needle that he would insert. He inserted the needle, rocked it back and forth to check its seat in my hip bone, and it, being seated, rocking my entire pelvis back and forth, said, "Here we go!"

From his position on my back, he pulled on the syringe plunger, creating a vacuum in your pelvis, causing the bone marrow to slurry its way into the syringe, slowly. A flashing yellow light blinded me as an excruciating pain caused me to try to rise off the table, but being thwarted by the nurses who had been carefully positioned at each shoulder, I had to lie there and take it. Hemosapien shouted, "Just five more seconds!"

Though it hurt like hell, I relaxed and thought that I could endure this for five more seconds. Those five seconds seemed like an eternity, though, and when they were through, the pain INSTANTLY stopped. There was no residual pain. No discomfort of any kind. All I had was the memory of a very brief, extremely unpleasant event, but it was over now. I then made my comments about the sign they needed to add to the reception area, as well as a few others. They all chuckled, nervously, but chuckled just the same.

Hemosapien sent the bone marrow sample off to a lab that looks at those sort of things, and his very excellent and delightful nurse, made an appointment for me to come back the following week.

The following week, my bride and I were escorted into Hemosapien's examination room, where we waited patiently for him to get through seeing a couple of other patients. I was seated in a chair in the corner. My bride was seated next to me. When Hemosapien came in, I immediately stood up. We shook hands and he said, "We've got the results of the bone marrow biopsy back," and he patted the examination table and said, "have a seat."

"I think I'd rather stand here."

"No I want you to sit here."

"No, You are perhaps going to give me some news that will affect me for the remainder of my life. I am going to be standing on my feet at full attention as I receive it."

With me standing erect and at full attention, he looked at me curiously and said, "You have Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia," and paused.

The silence was as pregnant as my friends non-syphilitic wife.

"Continue" I said.

"Unlike acute leukemias, you are not in any immediate danger of dying from this disease, but there is no cure for it, and you will one day die from it, or from some complication of it, or from something perhaps entirely unrelated, but you will die with it." He went on to explain to me how this would affect my life in the future. It was not good news, but it was the truth. I am always thankful for the truth.

Hemosapien seems to be the kindest person. He is quiet and reserved. He is fresh out of medical school, just finishing his residency and starting to practice. He is board certified in Hematology, and soon to be board certified in Oncology. I like him a lot. I suspect we will become close before he is finally dismissed from my service. He is young enough that, unless something untimely happens to him, or he is diagnosed with some cancer worse than mine, for being an Oncologist is no guarantee of being free from cancer, he will see me all along the way on my journey. I like the thought of that. I am thankful for that.

He then told me other things about my disease, about how my immune system was compromised by this disease, which resulted in my being unable to easily shake off that UVI, about other tests that needed to be run, and sent me off to the well trained and professional phlebotomists they have on staff there for more of my cancerous blood to be drawn for those tests.

I did not feel any different after I received that diagnosis. I do not feel any different now. I am thankful for that.

Before he sent me off, I was able to take the opportunity to paraphrase what he had told me in so many words. "Hemosapien, are you telling me that I am going to die at some point in the future, but you don't know when?"

Without any apparent equivocation he said, "Yes!"

"Well, that gives me lots of company, doesn't it?" I don't think he got it.

I was already in the Lord's hands when I knew that there was something wrong with me but could not give it a name. A nameless, faceless enemy is a fearfully hard fight, for tilting in dark corners at even darker shadows offers no comfort or relief. Now, a strong and worthy opponent has been found and named, and I will not yield easily. I am still in the Lord's hands. I can't see that anything has changed, other than I have a name for my enemy. I am thankful for that.

In the scriptures, Job had so many issues to face, but he faced them with the courage of his faith. He mourned his losses, but he held on to his faith which served to see his restoration. He had sincere friends making great sacrifices to serve him, in a genuine, but sometimes misguided way. Job spent quite a bit of time and energy educating and helping his friends through his ordeal; they all must have really loved each other to have helped each other so.

Job faced adversity. He was introduced to himself during his trial. I am thankful for Job, his example, and for the person who recorded his wonderful story so many thousands of years ago for me to benefit from today.

I have always been fond of the quotation I used at the beginning of this. It has been one of my favorites. Perhaps now is my opportunity to see what I am made of. Will I like the person I am introduced to? I hope so. Will I face new challenges while standing on my feet? I hope so. Can the Lord teach me things I need to learn during this process? Of course He can. Can He use me to help others? He has before, He certainly will now. Will He use others to help me? He already has and will continue to. I am thankful for that.

Now I am facing this adversity. Through it, I will learn what I am made of. I am thankful for that. If time reveals that I have a miniscule portion of the stuff that was in Job, then, I will be thankful for that.

One more thing. When one is seated in the waiting room of a cancer clinic as a patient, after previously thinking that he had been all medically checked out and that all this must be a bizarre mistake (perhaps like the syphilis diagnosis), one can ponder the things one hears and sees there while waiting for his own appointment with a cancer doctor. A single twenty minute period in this waiting room, seeing all the others who are there for their chemotherapy treatments, seeing others who may only have days to live, others whose bodies are broken and ravaged by the effects of disease to the point of death, will open one's eyes to a world that was previously only imagined in passing thought, and that very fleeting. It certainly adds a perspective that was previously lacking, because I have discerned that I am those others. We are all those others.

Though it is a harsh lesson, having rather learned this in a less poignant and personal way, I am thankful for this new perspective.

Lord, help me to continue to be thankful for the things that I HAVE. Let me face the challenges of this adversity with thanksgiving. Use me to help You meet the needs of others as I go on this journey. Direct my feet into pathways that You would have me tread. Help me to use my measure of faith to overcome my fears. Help me to use my measure of faith in ways that please You.

12/24/08 Christmas Missives among the Mistletoe

It's Christmas Eve. Debbie and Mother are at the lodge preparing our family dinner for this evening. Canaan is still asleep. I am down in my studio just fooling around, and I decided I would write something.

I had a great Thanksgiving. I was truly thankful for the peaceful time I had with my family all around, more so, I think, than ever before. This illness I have has not really made me a stop-and-smell-the-roses kind of person because I was already a stop-and-smell-the-roses kind of person. I think, perhaps, the roses are more vivid in color, more robust in fragrance, and just a week ago, the full moon never looked so full.

While I had a great Thanksgiving, I was a little more emotional than I usually am, though I was not an unemotional person to begin with. I suppose that this Christmas, I will be even more emotional than I was at Thanksgiving. I find myself choking up at the slightest thing . . . a kind word from a friend. A pat on the shoulder from my wife.. A hug from my granddaughter. It is delightful.

If there is one thing I have learned with this leukemia, it's that for every bit of good news that you receive, there is a bit of bad news that mitigates it back to neutral, or worse. It's one step forward, and one step backward. I have been earnestly looking for something that puts me in a lesser staging category than my doctor has placed me, and there has been some good news on that front. But every time I receive that good news, another phone call comes, and I am back to square one. I may have to give Dr. Hemosapien more credit than I did initially.

At the moment, I seem to have absolutely no interest in playing music. I can't bring myself to pick up a guitar. I have played my banjo a bit, but there was no joy in it. I have many new songs that I have written that I need to get busy recording, but I can't get past thinking about it. I canceled all my musical engagements except for the radio show after I got my diagnosis. I have a few scheduled for January, but I am not looking forward to them, other than the fact that I get to see all my friends at Taylor Grocery on January 24.

So many people have called me, sent cards, and offered words of encouragement. Some close friends get all choked up with emotion when they call. They love me and must be thinking that I am going to die any minute. I spend a good bit of time at the beginning of our conversations trying to reassure them and make them feel better. While I find this amusing, I'm sure that my friends find this very awkward. I hope that they don't find it so awkward that they stop calling or coming to see me.

An acquaintance that I work with and admire recently lost her husband after a long illness in which he was completely incapacitated. She had spent all of her non-working hours caring for him and had to pay sitters to stay with him while she was at work. When he passed away, so many people said that it was a blessing, but I could tell that she was very distraught and seemed not to know what to do with herself. Her boss asked me had I heard that her husband had died, and I told him yes. He then said that whatever I did, not to mention anything about it to her and get her all upset.

That seemed like the exact opposite of the thing that I needed to do.

A bit later, I walked over to her and told her I was so sorry about her loss. (What else can one say?) She immediately said she appreciated me saying that to her. She said folks had been avoiding her. They were so afraid they might upset her that they had not mentioned anything about her husband or her loss. She said she needed the empathy and condolences of others. She then gave me a big hug and a smile.

When someone has a loss, they haven't forgotten it. It won't suddenly pop up into their memory at the mention of it. If they are having a good day, it won't matter. If they are having a bad day, it will matter, but in a good way. One does not have to think of clever things to say. There is no need to offer philosophical, profound words that will certainly seem hollow to the person for whom they are intended—and to the offerer, upon reflection. Just a hello, I'm sorry, I hope you have a good day, perhaps a hug, perhaps a handshake, perhaps a pat on the back—these are sufficient.

There is no need to say, "It'll be all right," because it sure as hell isn't all right. There is no need to say, "Time heals all wounds," because we don't know how deep or bad that wound is. What the person who has lost knows, though, is that others have also had losses. In the sense that we can mourn our own losses as we reach out to others who have recently lost, we can all heal together, a little bit at the time.

In that vein, it is OK to ask me how I am doing. If we are acquaintances, expect me to say just fine. If we are truly friends, expect me to say just fine. If I don't say just fine, then perhaps I'll say that I am doing OK, TODAY! If you have a question about my treatments or my prognosis, it's OK to ask me in private, away from those I don't know. I will tell you the truth, if I think it's the truth you really want to hear, and I can keep it brief. No one would want to explain about their prognosis in front of a bunch of folks they don't even know. So ask anything, but ask it discretely.

I know I have this disease. Your mentioning it will not suddenly make me remember and send me into a pit of despair. I remember it constantly, and sometimes, with friends, I want to talk about it. I also want to talk about football games, the weather, work, music. I still like jokes, I like to laugh, I don't mind witty personal retorts, I have Leukemia, I am not deaf, you don't have to shout, you can poke fun. We can still be friends just the way we always have been.

I AM NOT MOROSE. I PROMISE YOU I WILL NOT BECOME SO.

I may be sick, and before it's over, I may be sick of being sick, but I will not let my sickness become the focus of my conversations with my friends. I have seen this unbecoming trait in others, and I do not want to see it in myself. However, as the disease progresses, I do not know how my personality will manifest itself. Right now, I am fearful that I could become the very thing I do not want to be. It seems understandable that one in the final stages of a terminal illness might not be good at light-hearted conversation, and their witty remarks may become poignantly unpalatable as a steady diet for their friends. I hope I am able to control this. I hope I can be free from this. I refuse to allow myself to become so. I am afraid I might become so and not realize it. How awful!

- *Lord, help me to keep the good attitude you have blessed me with. Help me to keep my sense of humor. Help me to hear every word that others say and let my ears work FOUR times as much as my mouth when I am in the company of others. Let the words that come out of my mouth be of good cheer and positive. Help them to be encouraging. Help them to be pleasant to the ears of those who hear them. Please let my friends and family always enjoy my company. Help me to bear the pain of my illness with a Spartan attitude. Help me to always be quick with a smile. Thank you for all these things you have already given me. I am truly thankful for every blessing, every moment, every peaceful interlude. I am thankful for every moment I have had in this life. Help me to live every day, right up to my last moment, with thanksgiving. Help me to never give up looking for that pony that must be somewhere in that big manure pile!*

1/10/09 Summation of my Trip to Houston

Debbie and I made the trip to the Big-As-Texas Cancer Center in Houston, Texas this past week. We stopped for visits with our friends George and Myra in Baton Rouge and my friend Rick in Lake Charles on the way down. We had a wonderful visit with these special friends. Debbie and I also enjoyed being with each other. Every time we go off together, we rediscover that we actually like each other's company. How wonderful to have this reconfirmed after 29 years of marriage. Our anniversary is tomorrow, January 11. We will have been married for 29 years. I cannot think of a single thing for which I am more thankful than my wife of 29 years.

What I actually learned and what Dr. Gooday told me at Big-As-Texas Cancer Center:

1. CD38 is a protein that may or may not inhabit the surface of the cancerous cells. The presence of CD38 is associated with progressive disease. My CD38 level is 24.9%, according to the tests run at Big-As-Texas Cancer Center on 1/8/09. This means that 24.9% of the observed CLL cells are actively presenting with the protein CD38. The level of 24.9% places me at the high end of the "iffy" category. >30% is considered to be an indicator of disease that can be expected to progress more rapidly. <20% is an indicator of indolent disease. CD38 tests done in commercial labs are frequently wrong and, therefore, untrustworthy. Note the differences in the CD38 tests which have already been prepared on me. (One from October '08 = <20%; another from November '08 = >40%). Dr. Gooday thinks the information, gotten from his own lab, is reliable, while the lab results previously obtained are suspect.
2. I perhaps will need treatment within two to five years, maybe sooner, maybe later, perhaps much later.
3. I will come back next year for further evaluation.
4. I will go to Dr. Hemosapien, in Meridian, every 3 months.
5. Big-As-Texas Cancer Center will actually do the IgVh gene mutational status and ZAP-70 tests. These will be done at the leukemia center at University of California at San Diego Medical Center (UCSD). The IgVh test is very expensive and is not done in commercial labs. Though this test is difficult and expensive, it will not cost me anything because the researchers at Big-As-Texas Cancer Center and at the UCSD want this information for their own purposes. This information will be shared with me and with Dr. Hemosapien.
6. I expect radical new treatments and procedures, and possibly complete cures, within the next two or three years.
7. I must not be alarmed or overanalyze my own case by those things I read.
8. CD38, ZAP-70, and IgVh are prognostic tools used to help determine WHEN I might actually need treatment. When I actually need treatment is dependent solely on how MY disease progresses in MY body, and not on the prognostic indicators. My body can respond differently than the indicators.
9. There is every reason to believe that I will be responsive to the chemotherapy when it is required.
10. If the chemotherapy were required today, it would be FC-R (fludarabine, cyclophosphamide and rituximab), which has been extremely effective.

11. Big-As-Texas Cancer Center will work with Dr. Hemosapien and will forward any test results and information to him. Dr. Hemosapien will forward any and all information about me to Big-As-Texas Cancer Center.
12. As a patient of Big-As-Texas Cancer Center, now in their system, I can call any of the support people at any time and schedule an appointment whenever I feel the need to do so. The complete facility and faculty of the leukemia center is at my disposal.
13. Dr. Gooday, *"The most important thing is not all of these predictors, cause all of these predictors tell you whether you are likely to progress, **and the best evaluation of whether you are likely to progress is whether you progress or not** (I love to hear the obvious stated. We humans sometimes overlook the obvious) . . . we've had people who I was sure were going to progress very rapidly from the base of this and about 10 years later they haven't done anything. I had a lady who had a 150,000 white count for 20 years, but it stayed stable at that 150,000. I wound up treating her when she was 78 . . . you worry about the white count when it gets to about 400,000 . . . Be optimistic . . . I plan for you to die from old age. I've been working exclusively on CLL for over 20 years, and it's been getting better every year [survival times and treatment effectiveness] . . . there's no reason why it should stop. Within my lifetime, and certainly within yours, I fully expect us to have a cure for CLL, using the body's own natural defense mechanisms, perhaps as soon as the next two or three years."*
14. Enjoy my life and get on with it. If I enjoy going to work, and enjoy coming home to my wife when the workday is over, and enjoy my free time, I am very fortunate.
15. No worries! Let them worry about it. It's their job.

What I learned at Big-As-Texas Cancer Center. This is not necessarily what they told me. I learned most of this about myself.

1. A newly diagnosed CLL patient reads far too much clinical material and then tries to interpret that material without the benefit of clinical training or experience to temper it.
2. All newly diagnosed patients need a second opinion because they know they have CANCER and "watch and wait" worries them to the point of distraction.
3. In their distracted state, they read far too much clinical material and then try to interpret that material without the benefit of clinical training or experience to temper it. (see number 1)
4. "Watch and Wait," **to the patient**, is usually indicative of some incompetence of their local physician.
5. The more assertive and type "A" personality the patient, the more incompetent are the local physicians **to the patient**.
6. The more assertive and type "A" personality the patient, the more clinical material is consumed by the patient who then continues to try and interpret it without the benefit of clinical training or experience to temper it. (see number 1 and 3)
7. Dr. Hemosapien, fresh from medical school and completion of his residencies, used the training and experience he received from the University of Mississippi Medical Center in Jackson, Mississippi, and all the resources available to him in Meridian, Mississippi, within his own clinic and from such laboratories and 3rd party services as are necessary and practical to him and his patients, to make his diagnosis, offer his prognosis and course for treatment.

8. Dr. Gooday, one of the world's foremost published and respected authorities in CLL used all the resources available to him at The Big-As-Texas Cancer Center, in Houston, Texas, which is the number one cancer treatment and research organization on the planet. Dr. Gooday has legions of support personnel, cutting edge cancer research, sophisticated diagnostic and treatment facilities, and full access to support an infrastructure of the CLL Consortium to make his diagnosis, offer his prognosis and course for treatment.
9. Dr. Hemosapien and Dr. Gooday, each using the tools and resources available to them for my diagnosis, prognosis, and benefit, said this:
 - I do not have the least progressive form of the disease, nor do I have the most progressive form of the disease,
 - The indications are I will perhaps need treatment via a chemotherapy cocktail of Fludarabine, Cyclophosphamide, and Rituximab within two to five years, perhaps sooner, perhaps later, perhaps never.
 - In the meantime, I should be routinely monitored for signs of disease progression
 - "Watch and Wait" is the best course of treatment at this time.
10. The diagnosis, prognosis and treatment recommendations of each doctor were independently arrived at, yet identical.
11. Congratulations to myself and Dr. Hemosapien. My confidence in him has been substantially reinforced, which is good for us both. Now I know I am in good hands. No better medical treatment can possibly be obtained than that which I am receiving now. I will not waste any more of my precious time worrying about it, when worrying is not required, since everything which can be DONE about it is being DONE!

What I know about me at the present time, unrelated to any medical diagnosis, one not being needed since I am not unfamiliar with myself . . .

1. I feel great
2. I have lots of energy until I run out.
3. When I run out of energy, I am OUT—capital O, capital U, capital T—OUT. I mean *OUT! Finis! Kaput! Terminado! Finito! Sinqua kinesis. Quittenzhen! Halten! STOP! Schleepen und Resten der vile! Le Minkey les arias non. El hombre no canta hasta manana! Go directly to jail, do not pass go, do not collect \$200.*
4. 3 or 4 hours of sleep completely recharges my energy system.
5. Energy levels crash in early evening.
6. I have slight discomfort due to some swollen lymph nodes. At this time, it absolutely cannot be classified as pain.
7. Exertion can leave me somewhat short of breath, but I recover very quickly. (*It just occurred to me that this is from being 234 lbs. and 51 years old, and I rather suspect that that is exactly what it is!*)
8. I am truly thankful for the many, many blessings I have:
 - a. A genuine, wonderful and personal relationship with my Creator!

- b. A genuine and wonderful relationship with a caring and loving wife!
- c. A genuine and wonderful relationship with a caring and loving family!
- d. Genuine and wonderful relationships with caring and loving friends.
- e. Meaningful and rewarding work that I ENJOY!
- f. The wonderful gift of music, which simultaneously soothes, calms and delights!
- g. A wonderful home in a pristine and beautiful natural setting!
- h. A table that offers a bountiful harvest for all who come!
- i. A cup that runneth over!
- j. The tremendous energy that I have!
- k. The rest I need when it is gone!
- l. The world-class healthcare that has been provided to me!
- m. The many, many quiet times I have with myself, such as this one!
- n. The ability to be by myself and enjoy my own company!
- o. The wonderful realization that after half-a-century, this list is still getting longer, not shorter!
- p. The blessings of Peace!
- q. The wonders of Joy!
- r. The jewel of Contentment!
- s. The ability to make a decision!
- t. The gift of Persistence!
- u. The gift of Wisdom! (I asked God for this, and He gave it to me. He gives it liberally to all who ask for it!)
- v. The remarkable blessing of Discernment!
- w. Adversity, because adversity introduces a man to himself.
- x. The ability to STOP!
- y. The ability to BE HERE NOW!
- z. The constant discovery of all the other things that need to be added to this list!
- aa. I am fortunate to have a doctor like Dr. Hemosapien.
- bb. I am fortunate to have a doctor like Dr. Mainmost.
- cc. I am fortunate to be able to participate in and benefit from a world class organization like Big-As-Texas Cancer Center.

I am eternally thankful for all of YOU who have prayed for me, thought of me, sprinkled holy water on the altar for me, spun prayer wheels for me, offered the sacrifice of animals for me, sprinkled salt on the Earth for me, offered prayers carried to the heavens on the magic smoke for me, stood in the gap for me, interceded for me, pulled for me, recited magical incantations

for me, helped me, talked well of me, thought well of me, sent soothing thoughts my way, rubbed magic crystals for me, burned incense for me, and to those of you who have bowed on your knees before Almighty God for me, invoked the Name that is Above All Names, and petitioned the great and eternal **I AM THAT I AM** on my behalf! I receive it and am thankful for it! No bad thing can be offered in that Name that is Above all Names, and no truly good thing can come from any other source. A thought and a prayer offered in true love is honored by the true source of love and cannot be counterfeited or detained from its true purpose, such is the love that God has for all of us.

I am especially thankful to those of you whose faith was made manifest by your offers of your homes, your purses, your gifts, and your deeds. Your rewards are tenfold, and your gifts and blessings will be cheerfully paid forward with the dividends that will be paid to humanity increasing exponentially, beyond measure.

1/15/09 Thanks to Cheryl at Hemosapien's Office

Attn: Cheryl/Medical Records

Hemosapien's Office

Re: My records which you sent out to Big-As-Texas Cancer Center

Dear Cheryl:

Thank you for sending me a copy of the fax receipt from December 10, 2008, when you sent my records out to Big-As-Texas Cancer Center. Though I had spoken with them, and they had confirmed to me that they had received these records, they called me early the day before my appointment on January 8, as I was traveling to Houston, to tell me that they had not received these records and asked me could I call you and have them sent ASAP.

I had this fax receipt with me and was able to tell them immediately that 55 pages had been faxed to their office on December 10, and that I had the fax receipt. I suggested that they go and find them rather than have them sent again.

Five minutes later, they called me back and said they had located them, *in their proper place in their office*. Sort of makes one wonder why they didn't look there first.

Thank you for this attention to detail. It is sincerely appreciated.

Best regards,

Chris Sharp

cc: Dr. Hemosapien

2/5/09 From Gooday

dear chris,

the san diego results show that the zap 70 is elevated and that the igvh gene is un-mutated. both results suggest that the cll will progress and need treatment. we will watch your lab results as they are sent.

trust you are feeling well.

gooday

Well, after being told that UMC San Diego has one of the top laboratories in the world and not to worry about previous indicators done at other labs, it seems that UMC San Diego confirms what the others had to say. While this is not good news, it is reliable, and that is certainly something to be thankful for! Those of you with CLL will know what this means. Those of you who don't, well, it's not the best news, but it's a far cry from the worst!

Gooday says he'll keep his eye on it. So many people are! I am so thankful!

7/13/09 CII Global Research Foundation

It seems that Dr. Gooday is very familiar with the work of the CLL Global Research Foundation. It also seems that many sources of funding have dried up with the downturn (read that CRASH) of the economy, and this funding needs to be replaced so critical research will not be halted in mid-stream. Please visit the following link [CLL GLOBAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION](#) and read all about the various programs, research, and many things being done that are on the cutting edge of cancer treatment. Much of the research done on CLL correlates with other leukemias and cancers. Of course, I wish them Godspeed on their research, and I am confirming this by making a donation. I urge you to do the same.

7/13/09 Apparent Lapse of Blog Activity

There has been an obvious lapse in posting to this blog, as witnessed by the gap from 2/5/09 to 7/13/09. **I only posted this blog to my website on July 9, 2009, so that means I have been delinquent in writing, not delinquent in posting to my blog.** Things are not always what they seem to be. The thing that has happened to my writing, in the meantime, is that I have been having a LIFE—one filled with the ups and downs we all experience, but one with far more victories than defeats.

After my trip to Big-as-Texas Cancer Center, I went to see my friend Neil Earth-Planter, who owns a wonderful nursery. Though a few years older than me, Neil has been my friend since the summer of 1969. Neil was one of Mississippi's first bona-fide hippies and was a good friend of a co-employee of my grandfather's hardware store. He used to come around frequently. In 1969, I was a mere 12 years old, but I marveled at these hippies, with their long hair, tie-dyed shirts, bell bottom jeans, and the strange, exotic fragrances I encountered when in their company. I marveled at the comments of my grandfather and his cronies about them. I marveled at their girlfriends. I marveled at being marveled. Their presence, even astonishing in San Francisco that summer, was as foreign to Mississippi as Neil Armstrong's footsteps were to the moon. The summer of 1969 was pivotal, beyond measure.

About 15 years ago, maybe longer, Neil was diagnosed with Leukemia, an acute one. He was the first person I really knew close to my age group that had gotten a "fatal" cancer. We all knew he was done for. So did his doctors. So did everyone else. Everyone but Neil. Poor ol' Neil. Good ol' Neil. Isn't it a shame about Neil? As good as dead Neil! Well, ol' Neil wasn't quite so sure about that. He took his chemo, lost all that hair, but he survived. His hair grew back. A few years later, his leukemia came back, even more "fatal" this time. We all knew he was done for. So did his doctors. So did everyone else. Everyone but Neil. Poor ol' Neil. Good ol' Neil. Isn't it a shame about Neil? As good as dead Neil! Well, ol' Neil took his chemo again, lost all his hair, which didn't come back as thick as in his youth, but it did come back, and ol' Neil is still with us, doing fine, helping folks plant the Earth with beautiful shrubs and flowers every day.

I went to see ol' Neil, and he said, very matter-of-factly, "Get on with your LIFE!"

He also said this, "When they tell you to take chemo, take your chemo. If it makes you feel bad, you'll get over it. If it works, you'll be OK, perhaps for a while, perhaps for the rest of your natural life. If it doesn't, you'll die, sooner or later . . . BUT . . . if you sit around and worry about it, become sullen and morose, ill tempered and self-centered, and focus all your energy on what you lost, you will most definitely be consumed, in addition to losing all your friends. GET ON WITH YOUR LIFE!!"

Ol' Neil made a lot of sense to me. I think I'll run over and ask him about the proper care of bromeliads, a subject which will fling him into a whirlwind spate of lectures on how so many do far too much in caring for them, smother them to death with over-nurturing. No soft pedal from ol' Neil, whether you're talking about plants or malevolent malignancies. How I love him so!

It seems there are others in the world of leukemia that I know as more than a passing acquaintance.

My friend Buckshot Steve now lives in Florida. I first met Buckshot in our mutual hometown of Meridian. He and his brother are both stellar musicians. His brother is a genius musical technician of the first order, a musicians' musician. Buckshot? Earthy. Genuine. A soulful

singer he is, the real thing, what-you-see-is-what-you-get, bona-fide, folks-like-to-hear-him-cause-he's-real musician; just the kind of musician that makes a great platform for technicians like his brother, each needing the other. It was Buckshot who provided me with my very first paying gig as a musician when he called me to play with him at Mississippi's famous Neshoba County Fair. We go way back.

Buckshot ran across my website one day, or perhaps my MySpace page, listened to the music I had posted there, and on a whim, after a little research, got my telephone number from a mutual friend and gave me a call. We discussed old times, recent times, old music and new music. We had a good telephone time, which is unusual for me since I prefer my telephone conversations to last about 30 seconds.

He asked me about recent musical happenings I had been involved with, and I told him that because of some health issues that were new for me, I had cut back on my performance schedule.

"What kind of health issues?" he asked.

"Well it seems that I have Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia," I replied.

"So do I!" he said.

A pregnant silence ensued.

Well, let me tell you, that the phone conversation, already extended far beyond my normal thirty-second enjoyable period, now went into extended overdrive. Buckshot, it turns out, had been diagnosed as a Stage IV. Had been through an FC-R regimen of chemo TWICE, and other than being left with some neutropenia, for which he was currently being treated, was doing remarkably well. We have been in touch many times since that phone conversation. I plan on staying in touch with Buckshot and perhaps, soon, making a trip down to Florida to see him.

Then, there is another musician friend I greatly admire, Banjo Herb. I had admired his music for several years, knew him vicariously through the many mutual friends we share, and finally got to meet him when he and his band played on THE SUCARNOCHEE REVUE as guests. For those of you who don't know, the Sucarnochée Revue is a nationally syndicated radio show recorded live at the University of West Alabama and at the Temple Theatre in downtown Meridian. The Revue, of which I am happily a regular member, features music and musicians from the Black Belt Region of Mississippi and Alabama.

Banjo Herb and I were delighted to finally make each other's acquaintance. Backstage, we played banjos together and enjoyed bonding in the way only musicians with common interests can when sharing the joy of music. A few days after the show, the host, Jacky-Jack, told me that he had told Banjo Herb about my illness. He said that Banjo Herb indicated to him that he also had CLL. It turns out that Banjo-Herb was recently diagnosed with Stage 0 (I hope he stays that way!) and seemed to be fortunate enough (imagine using the word fortunate with any kind of cancer!) to have one of CLL's more indolent varieties.

Needless to say, we have tentative plans to produce a recording of a bluegrass band made up of CLL patients.

Perhaps TENTATIVE is not the best idea. Maybe we need to firm those plans up. Maybe it is an error to think that we have plenty of time. Maybe our statistics will change. Maybe our leukemia will make some malevolent twist and morph into something worse. Maybe that bane of CLL sufferers, a secondary infection, will pop us and whisk us off into the other world. Maybe this. Maybe that. What if this? What if that?

I think I'll go and see ol' Neil. He'll tell me what I can expect with that sort of thinking.

I am thankful for Neil Earth-Planter.

I am thankful for Buckshot Steve. (That is him on the right!)

I am thankful for Banjo Herb!

There is so much to be thankful for



7/14/09 Off to See Hemosapien Tomorrow

I have my three-month checkup with Hemopsapien tomorrow. I am looking forward to seeing him because of lymph nodes that have become enlarged to the point of being more than noticeable; they are now very uncomfortable. We will see what he has to say.

Of course, Hemosapien's clinic sends a report to Gooday's clinic so that they can keep up with any developments, but I am not sure this works like it is supposed to. I can't be certain that they actually get sent to the Big-as-Texas Cancer Center, nor can I be certain that if the information is sent, that Big-As-Texas Cancer Center gets it into my file like they are supposed to. I must follow up on this.

I will report back after my trip to see Hemosapien. I know y'all are breathlessly awaiting.

7/14/09 Your Insurance, Your Questions, and Your Behavior

In January of 2008, I received notice from my group health insurer that effective immediately, there would be policy limits of \$100,000 annually and \$1,000,000 lifetime. Though it nagged at me, it was not urgent enough for me to move off-center to get supplemental insurance. That little nag was not un-noticed. I thought about a cancer policy. I thought about supplemental insurance. Either of those were easily affordable options for me at the time. I should have listened to that nag! I can't touch either of them with a ten-foot pole now. I am sure that insurers have already downloaded my phone number from some prescreened list of numbers to block. If I called them, I'd no doubt get the following pre-recorded message, "We're sorry, but this office will not accept any calls from your number. Please refrain from dialing this number ever again. Thank you for your cooperation."

What that means is that I'll have to fight to manage every dollar of my insurance, making sure that none of the insurance money is spent unwisely. (One round of FC-R chemo can cost as much as \$60,000 I am told, though no one really seems able to answer that question for me.) I have always done this, since it is MY insurance, but I don't think my insurer appreciates it. I don't think my health-care providers appreciate it, either. I seem to be the only one. I do know this, though, if you are my health-care provider, and I ask you if those expensive MRI's are really necessary—me already suspecting that you own shares in the local imaging center and in a recent meeting of shareholders was instructed to help YOUR business prosper by keeping the patient count up—and you then tell me that they're not really necessary, and then ask me, point-blank why I care since my insurance is paying for it anyway, do not be surprised at my response. When I very plainly tell you what I think, if you really believe that is the right way to conduct your relationship with your patients, you will **NEVER** voice this to them, ever again." For additional services they do not offer themselves, doctors should have to disclose their interests in any clinic they send you to.

As patients and insureds, we can be as diligent as humanly possible. We can try to ensure that we stay within our PPO network, only to discover that our physician has sent our blood off to a lab for some expensive test, and that lab is not listed as a provider under our PPO network. I recently went through this at Hemosapien's office. They got my insurance information. They confirmed that they, themselves, were listed on my PPO network. They failed, though, to confirm that the lab they sent my bone marrow sample to was part of my PPO network. That lab was completely invisible to me until their bill and my insurance statement came. It turns out, insurance only paid 50% of an *un-discounted* charge, leaving me with \$600 to pay directly to the lab. Rather than write letters (sometimes filled with vitriol) to all (my usual technique), I called the lab in Ocean Springs, Mississippi. I got a kind lady on the other end, who asked me for my information and who promised to call me back. I was suspicious of ever getting that phone call, but to my surprise, she called back right away.

She said that she had to pull my file first before she could talk to me. I told her my dilemma and said that I was asking her for whatever discount they gave to their most favored customer. She said that Blue Cross was the only insurer they had any discount schedule with, and she would be glad to give me that discount, which would amount to \$480, leaving me owing them a balance of \$120. I told her I was sending them a check for \$120.00 that day, and I did. I then told Hemopsaipen's office that they could not send any more of my collected specimens to that lab because they are not in my network. We'll see what happens in the future.

You might wonder how this works. Frequently, because of contracts our physicians have with providers for services they cannot do themselves, those providers are invisible to us until we receive the bill (radiologists, lab services, etc.). Just as frequently, we find out from our insurance company that those providers are not on our "network" of preferred providers. Sometimes you can argue with your own insurer and get them to allow you the full benefit. I once successfully did this after a lithotripsy to get rid of a kidney stone. The lithotripsy provider was NOT part of the hospital to which I was admitted and was invisible as a stand-alone entity to whom I was fiscally obligating myself. The lithotripsy provider in Dallas said that I was the ONLY person they had ever seen who had gotten their insurance company to do this. (I am very persuasive!) The third party providers see this all the time. What one typically receives from his insurer when going out of network is a benefit of 50% of the UNDISCOUNTED charges. If you call the third party provider, explain their invisibility, and ASK them for their MOST FAVORED CUSTOMER discount, they will usually give it to you. If not their most favored discount, they will certainly give you SOME discount. Of course, copies of all correspondence went to my physicians, and they were admonished to NEVER send out anything for third party services unless they confirmed that those third parties were on my network or had my written permission. Since then, my physicians have found another lab that is part of my network. You have to be sure to ASK your physicians what third party services they use and demand an answer. You will get it, but only if you are persistent.

The gist is this: it's YOUR life, it's YOUR insurance, it's YOUR money. You have the right to ask questions. You have the right to watch the money. When doctors, nurses, phlebotomists, lab technicians, orderlies, x-ray technicians, receptionists, medical records clerks, billing clerks, insurance clerks, administrative personnel, business managers, chiefs of staffs, and CEOs act as if it's an inconvenience for you to be asking them questions, be sure they know you think it's inconvenient that they keep doing things in such a manner as to beg the questions and, furthermore, inconvenient when they cannot, will not, or are unable to provide you with a prompt, satisfactory answer.

You can do this politely but persistently. If they mistake your persistence for rudeness, and they frequently will because the medical establishment is not used to having you question how they do things, then it is their mistake. You are not cattle. You are not sheep. When you ask a question of someone who is serving you, you deserve an answer and will usually get it if they believe you actually expect it. If they define that as rude, their definition is insufficient and does not serve them well. Let them change.

Wading through the complex, seemingly purposeful obfuscation that is modern American Health Care is tedious. One can learn, though, how to avoid many pitfalls and mistakes, but not all. Some we only learn about too late to avoid, but that is what a memory is for.

If having a memory and relying on it equates with rudeness to others, so be it!

I hope Hemosapien and his office people do not read this before tomorrow!

I laugh at myself!

7/16/09 Chemo . . . Chemo . . . Chemo

I feel like the main actor in a Greek tragedy, the chorus in the background chanting, "Chemo . . . chemo . . . chemo!" At every turn, the chorus interrupts me chanting, "Chemo . . . chemo . . . chemo!" The phone rings and the telemarketer on the other end is chanting, "Chemo . . . chemo . . . chemo!" I walk out to the pasture and the horses break out in a gallop, kicking, chanting in unison, "Chemo . . . chemo . . . chemo!" The cicadas, on this hot, July, Mississippi day, drone on incessantly, "Chemo . . . chemo . . . chemo!" I feel like *Oedipus's* father must have felt.

"I think it's time for Chemo," Hemosapien said softly, in real time, peering over the results of my CBC.

So much for the two to five years they told me about just a few months ago. Two years condensed down to seven months.

There are options, though, which I must now consider. FC-R (Fludarabine, Cyclophosphamide and Rituximab)? Chlorambucil? Mega-toxo-plaster-of-paris? Some other therapy? Too many decisions for today.

"Chemo . . . chemo . . . chemo!" says the TV weatherman.

My wife, informing me of her immediate plans for a local shopping trip says, "Livi and Maggie are spending the night. I am going to the grocery store to pick up a few items. Do you want me to pick up some chemo the grill?"

"What, did you say?" I wake from my trance and ask her.

"Are you listening to me?" she asked. "I said I am going to the store to pick up a few things since Livi and Maggie are spending the night. Do you need for me to pick up some chemo. Cheeee-mmmmm! Chhheee-chhheeee-m-m-m-m-mmmmmmo! chhhhheeeeee-mmmmmmmmo-mmmmmmm . . ." her voice trailing off as she walks down hall and out the door, recognizing my distraction, and giving up on the conversation.

When I asked him, Hemosapien agreed to consult with Gooday at Big-as-Texas Cancer Center. We are both pretty sure that Gooday is going to say that we should pursue with FC-R since he is its champion, and not without good reason. But Gooday will say what Gooday will say.

I looked over my CBC results after the doctor's visit and updated my BUCKET CHART, which I got courtesy of Chaya Venkat and her most excellent website **CLL TOPICS** (<http://www.clktopics.org>) back when I was first diagnosed in October, 2008. (*By the way Chaya, thanks for such an excellent site. I have learned so much there!*)

I click on my bookmarked tab for **CLL TOPICS** and up pops the words, "Chemo . . . chemo . . . chemo!" The articles all seem to be written by **Chemo** Venkat.

Have I mentioned yet that since I met with Hemosapien yesterday and got this bit of sorry news that I have been somewhat distracted? Well, OK, very distracted, if you must! Easily distracted! Twice and thrice distracted!

Restless, I flip on the news and listen to the Republicans and the **Chemocrats** question Sonia Sotochemo during her confirmation hearings about her views on the law.

"Chemo . . . chemo . . . chemo!" said Sonia Sotochemo to Senator Chemostopher Dodd (D-Conn.)

"Chee-mo! Cheeee-mmmo!" he answered, and for good measure, "Chhhheeeee-m-m-m-mo!"

"Chhhheeeee-mmmmmmmmo!" chided Senator Lindsey Chemoham (R-SC).

"Ch-Ch-Chhhhhheeeee-m-m-m-mmmo!" said chirpy Senator Al Frankchem-o (R-MN), just glad to finally be there.

Below is my Bucket Chart. I hope it is useful to someone.

						9/13/2008	10/8/2008	11/18/08	12/8/08	1/9/09	4/14/09	7/15/09
Prognostic Indicator			Bucket A	Bucket B	Bucket C			My individual indicators	HemoSapien	BATCC	HemoSapien	HemoSapien
FISH	Fluorescence in situ Hybridization	I have had this done	13q Deletion Only	Normal Karotype or Trisomy 12	11q or 17p deletion			Normal Karotype			Will not do this again unless suspected change	
β2M	Beta-2 Microglobulin	Measured routinely by labs with a simple blood sample	Below 2.0	2.0 to 4.0	>4.0			3		3.3	Will Not Routinely Test this again	
IgVH	Gene Mutation Status*	At the time article publication, this test was only done by a few research universities and hospitals. This may have changed in the ensuing five years since publication. There are other tests, not so expensive, which mimic this. Unmutated Ig indicates a poorer prognosis.	Mutated	Mutated / Unmutated	Unmutated					Confirmed Unmutated	This does not change	
CD38	Cell Marker	Measured by Flow Cytometry on just the CLL cells, not all cells. This is one of the tests that mimic IgVH.	<20%	between 20% and 30%	>30%		negative	41%**		24.9%	Will not routinely test this again	
ZAP-70		Relatively easy to measure by commercial labs. Mimics IgVH. Negative is less than 20% expression. Positive is greater than 20%.	<20%	<> 20%	>20%				Positive	Confirmed Positive	This does not change	
White Blood Cell Count						11,000	18,000	14,600	19,000	23,960	25,400	28,600
ALC Doubling Time		WBC Times Percentage of Lymphocytes				6,000	14,040	11,388	14,820	18,300	19,700	23,100
ALC Doubling Time	Monitoring the time it takes the number of CLL cells to double	Longer than 1 year? About 1 year? Shorter than one year?	>1 year	<> 1 year	<1 year							
Rai Stage			0 or 1	2	3 or 4			2				
Chemotherapy Indications: Fuldarabine/Cyclophosphamide/Rituximab will be administered sometime between								10/01/10	and	10/01/11		
4/14/09: 77% of my white blood cells are immature (malignant) lymphocytes. Multiply the Total WBC by .77 to get Absolute Lymphocyte count.												
** This test was done by US Labs. Considerable difference between this one and the one done at BATCC												
Article: What Type of CLL Do You Have												
Author: Chaya Venkat												
Date of Publication: 9/15/03												
Published by: CLL Topics, Inc.												
Website: http://www.clltopics.org												

Let's see . . .

Bucket C Items

- IgVH UNMUTATED
- Zap-70 Positive
- Absolute lymphocyte count is doubling in significantly less than one year.

Bucket B Items

- Normal Karotype (at this time! They tell me this can change into something WORSE!)
- CD38
- Beta 2 Microglobulin

It seems to me that the BEST category to be in is no CLL at all. That's out!

The NEXT best thing is to be in a low-risk category. That's out, too!

The NEXT best thing would be to be in a medium-risk category. That's out, too!

The NEXT best thing would be to be in a low-high risk category. That SEEMS to be me.

The NEXT best thing would be to be in a high-risk category.

The WORST thing would be to be dead.

I suppose if one looks at it that way, anything this side of dead is doing pretty good. I am thankful for that!

But dammit, this isn't the way it is supposed to be. I wasn't supposed to get this disease! But I did, and I have gotten used to the idea that I have it. But then, dammit, I was not supposed to be in any kind of un-favorable category within the subgroups of this disease. But I am, and I suppose I have gotten used to it. But dammit, my disease was not supposed to progress nearly so early. But it has, and I'm not used to that. I find it all rather distracting.

"Chemo . . . chemo . . . chemo!" says the patter of raindrops on my office windowsill.

"Chemo . . . chemo . . . chemo!" says the rumble of not-so-distant thunder.

Now, we're back to worrying about our insurance. It looks like I'm going to be spending some hefty amounts before the government fixes health care for me. I'm fortunate to have insurance, but with cancer, I am under-insured because of an annual limitation placed on my policy, which I knew but did nothing about.

At Hemosapien's office, I kept having visions of being directed to the newly hired *GOVERNMENTAL HEALTH INSURANCE CORPORATION ASSISTANT JUNIOR DEPUTY TAX-ASSESSMENT APPROPRIATIONAL COMPLIANCE OFFICER-PERSON*, of the newly created *MINISTRY OF HEALTH-AND-HUMAN-SERVICES-FOR-TRUTH AND REELECTION*, who would tell me, "I'm from the government, and I'm here to help you!" Even though I'm a bit under-insured, I am not seeking the help of the government. I can cope. I will just have to *manage*. I think one of the things wrong with our insurance today is that health-care providers and patients are mostly spending **OTHER PEOPLE'S MONEY!**

On a serious note, I am very aware of what having insurance has meant as far as my ACCESS to health care and RECEIVING health care. I am thankful for it. As to whether that health care results in a favorable outcome? There is no way of knowing. We can view that through the clear lens of hindsight one day. The forward looking lens is rather cloudy, don't you think?

As I was listening to Nancy Pelosi's TV sound byte about the House health-care proposal, and looking at the photo-op of all those smiling members of congress having their picture taken like the bill had been signed into law—those same congress people excluding themselves and their employees from participation (what a mockery of us all!)--Nancy's mouth twisted and distorted into a venomous fountain, spewing out, "Chemo . . . chemo . . . cheeeeemmmmo!" Looking directly into the camera at me, her eyes indicated that my malevolent affliction would be the one that would jeopardize the future of universal health care for all Americans and, thus, the economy of America and the entire free world, causing total social, civic and economic collapse of civilization, and the destruction of all life as we know it. Those congress people with her, in unison, in harmony, in barbershop quartet Southern Gospel big-sixth-ending, high-tenor-*castrato-unfortunato*, singing, "Chemo . . . chemo . . . chemo-wo-wo-wo!"

Is that simply a distraction, or was that a lysergic acid diethylamide digression, the product of youthful indiscretion(s)? A peyote perusal? A silly psilocibin psychosomatically sequestering sentimental second?

"Chemo!" Pelosi snarled through gritted teeth, glaring, red-eyed, vitriolic. I turned off the TV to stop that hallucination. Stopping the government's cure for an ailing health-care system is not so easy.

Now it's off next week for a full body CT scan so Hemosapien and Gooday can talk things over. I'm in good hands.

I'm thankful for that.

Did I mention that I was distracted?

I think I'll go and write a song called, "Them Ol' Leukemia Blues!" Maybe I'll go and see Neil Earth-Planter. Maybe I'll call Buckshot Steve. Maybe I'll have a sip of a fine 21 year-old single malt scotch I've been hoarding. Maybe I'll trade that bottle of 21 year-old scotch for a micro-fractional dose of Rituximab, they're both so expensive. Maybe the ceiling fan, wobbling at the end of it's extension pipe, will stop it's constant squeaky, "Chemo . . . chemo . . . chemo." Maybe the world will stop. Maybe the government will help. Maybe Nancy Pelosi will one day make some sense to me when she talks. Maybe Hillary Clinton will be a good Secretary of State. Maybe the Sunnis and the Shiites will be able to get along. Maybe the government stimulus money, which the government does not have, will actually help the economy. Maybe it will create jobs. Maybe it will save jobs. Maybe the President's forecast for its effect won't be downgraded further. Maybe one day banks will learn not to lend money to people who cannot pay it back so they can sell mortgage-backed securities to others, thus transferring their bad-risks to the government and others. Maybe governments, financial institutions, and people will one day want to create real wealth and not chase the illusion of money where none exists. Maybe Barrister Malcolm J. Dunnigan, Esquire, Senior Director of Finance of the National Bank of Nigeria is really going to transfer 17.5MILLION US DOLLARS to my bank account. Maybe Enzyte Bob is for real. Maybe one day the people of Connecticut will send Chris Dodd home for good. Maybe one day American politicians will stand for something and be responsible. Maybe one day we'll really send Mr. Smith to Washington. When we do, Maybe Mr. Smith will really serve his country instead of his own reelection. Maybe people will learn to handle their own money. Maybe they will get out of debt. Maybe they will learn to read the fine print. Maybe my

doctors know what they're doing. Maybe my body will cooperate with them. Maybe this chemo will work. Maybe Jesus still loves me.

"Chemo . . . chemo . . ."

"Chemo . . ."

At least the Greek chorus has stopped.

7/17/09 Confusion Yields to Clarity

My friend Rita sent me this photo. Isn't it great!! Though not so obvious as this one, we see these all the time. Thanks, Rita.



Yes, Jesus still loves me. I had you worried with that, didn't I? I just threw it in to see if you were paying attention. Sorry for the melodrama. If there is one thing I am sure of, it is my faith. I'm glad I had it before I embarked on this adventure. The adventure, not the faith, is the new development. I don't think I'd have time for both of them to be new.

In the early morning sun of this July day in Mississippi, in the very unseasonal coolness of 65 degrees, surrounded by the incredible beauty, peace, and stillness that is my home, with the comfort of the "ED" sign looking back at me from the pond dam, and after a good night's sleep, things seem very different. Things are much calmer. I am not distracted, but focused, and the droning of the cicadas just says, "whir-buzz-za-wuzz-a-wuzz," not "chemo . . . chemo . . . chemo." Today, I find it comforting, not distracting.

Isn't that how life works? One day we have the victory, and the next we suffer defeat. One day, we are kings sitting atop the mountain and the next, the mountain has been removed from under us, riotously casting us down into the valley in utter dejection. One day, we call down fire from heaven and destroy our enemies; the next, we hide in a cave, fearful of our lives (Elijah!). The valley we traverse is no deeper than it was when viewed from the mountaintop. It just seems that way when looking up towards the former heights we once occupied. While our situation has changed, it does not change our essence? It merely changes our perception.

There's nothing like a good night's sleep and a cool, calm, and yet again, cool, July morning in Mississippi to change one's perception. I have no doubt that the coolness of this morning was prepared especially for me. The forces of nature, at the suggestion of the great I AM THAT I AM, redirected themselves in such a way as to cause the jet stream to drop down, enveloping the South in a trough to allow cool air from Canada to come sweeping down, driving out the hot, humid, torpid air from the Gulf of Mexico, just for my personal, immediate benefit. The rest of the people across the South are merely inadvertent co-beneficiaries, but benefiting, nevertheless. They'll never know the real reason for their benefits. From defeat back to victory, my typical overly-developed sense of self-indulgent self-importance returning with the quiet but firm confidence of the cool North breeze now gently caressing my face as I sit here and type this on my front porch. I am laughing at myself, hope you laugh with me, and would appreciate if you'd make it clear that you are indeed laughing with me and not at me!

Persistence in the face of the juggernaut that is medical system paperwork and obfuscation will serve you well once you get comfortable with being a troublemaker, for that is surely how you will be perceived by those who medically serve you. I think at this point, Hemosapien and his

staff have come to know that I expect an answer to a question, so they get it for me. I can just imagine them now in the early morning staff meeting, reviewing the day's appointments, saying, "You know, He's coming in today."

"Yes, I see that!"

"And you know how HE can be!"

"Yes, we do!" the staff saying in unison.

And Hemosapien saying, "I've had copies of his file made and distributed to each person he is likely to ask to talk to, including the business manager, the insurance office, and the nurses so that if he has any questions, we will be able to answer them on the spot."

The staff, rolling their eyes towards heaven, receives the copies of my files, going off to their offices and cubicles, crossing their fingers that they won't have to talk to me.

As they turn to leave, Hemosapien saying, "If you do not have the answer he needs, refer him back to me. Do not send him to someone else who may not have what he asks for. He doesn't like getting what he calls 'the run around' and will be right back to me, bristling and angry like a badger roused from his sleep by a Pomeranian. Just send him back immediately. I've sort of learned how to handle him. I think, maybe"

They sigh, fearful of what the day may hold, glancing at their watches, knowing that in just another two hours, there I'll be, standing there in real time. If they feel that way, they have become proficient at concealing it. They are all wonderful, from the professional phlebotomists who slide needles into your veins with the soft grace of a mother caressing her babe, to the nurses who smile and greet you at every turn. Hemosapien's nurse is particularly wonderful; she is cheerful, courteous, disarming, and has learned to control me with a simple shake of her head and a quiet, "tsk-tsk." I think she knows that my wife is very fond of her, and I would have hell to pay if she somehow let Debbie know that I had exhibited bad behavior at their office. If I raged like a demon at Hemosapien, Debbie would just shrug her shoulders. However, if I were slightly, just ever-so-slightly, impatient with Nurse J—or if due to any reason of hormonal imbalance or lunar phase, or any one of a number of feminine behavioral patterns we men find so mysteriously bewildering, Nurse J's *perception* was that I had been the least bit testy—Debbie would be the badger and I would find myself the Pomeranian. Funny how things can turn so fast. Well, I can dish it out, but I can take it as well! We serve ourselves well when we learn what it's like at both ends of the spectrum. If I am out of line, you can tell me. If I act like I don't like it, you can remind me that I wrote this; that'll whip me into shape. I hate to be accused of being inconsistent. I hate it in the worst way.

I have googled and googled to find any website that contains information about what they might charge for chemotherapy. Goggling, one can find out more information about CLL than any layman can possibly process, and if a layman persists in trying to process all this information, a layman can get himself into real trouble, sort of like I did at the beginning. Goggling and finding out what the COSTS of chemotherapy are, though, has been very unproductive. Talking to fellow CLL sufferers has been no better because the ones that I have talked to have either not cared or not been interested enough to know the fiscal details of their own medical odyssey. They are only concerned with the more urgent LIVING details of their odyssey, which I have to admit is completely understandable since they are focused on what

they feel is most important and who am I to object to what THEY think is important in their own life!

So, when Hemosapien indicated that it was time for chemotherapy, which he believed should be a full course of FC-R, I point blank asked him what this would cost. His answer?

"I don't know, but I will find out and get back to you. I'll send you an e-mail just as soon as I find out," he said.

Ladies and gentlemen, business and professional people all over the world, managers, sub-managers, and the managed, this is a perfectly acceptable answer. Sometimes we don't know. We can't know everything. If we know something, it can't always be at the forefront of our mind, ready for instant recall. It's the getting back that is important. Sometime, circumstances require that the first getting back is this, "I still don't have the answer you need, but I am working on it. I expect to have an answer in a couple of days."

I'm still happy. After a couple of days, the second "getting back" may be, "Sorry, I still don't have the answer, but I'm getting closer." While I'm getting less happy, I am still content. Let's keep this dialog going until I get the answer. At least we're moving in the right direction.

Here is what Hemosapien said in his e-mail the very next day.

\$11,760 per cycle FCR. Given q 28days rather than the 21 as I earlier stated. Up to 6 cycles were given in the study. Gooday was the lead author on this study published in JCO 2005. One question I will be asking him specifically is his thoughts on lower doses of F&C and higher R (aka FCR-lite). A report earlier this year demonstrated equal efficiency and less toxicity.

If I am not served by that, then I cannot be served at all. Not only do I have my answer, but Hemosapien and Gooday will communicate about the best way for me to take this highly toxic cocktail of powerful anticancer drugs. I am blessed beyond all measure. Thank you, Hemosapien. Thank you, Gooday.

Now that I've demonstrated my thankfulness to those working on my behalf, let me go on and venture into the pool a little deeper to the areas where one might think that I seem ungrateful because I do not seem to be satisfied. Well, there are more questions raised by the cost of the FCR.

\$11,760 times 6 equals \$70,560. That's a lot of money. That's a big chunk of my annual insurance cap of \$100,000, some of which has already been spent. Well, of course, there are PPO discounts involved. I have been quoted the suggested retail price. When was the last time anyone actually sold anything for the MSRP? I called my PPO organization, PPO PLUS, at the number they provided for customer service. I got a young man on the phone, told him who I was, explained to him what I needed, and this is the answer I got.

- I would need the treatment code from the health-care provider.
- If I had the code, the discount negotiated between the health-care provider and PPO Plus is contractual between the two, and I am not privileged to that information.
- He could not tell me anything.
- I would have to call the health-care provider.

That means I have to talk to Hemosapien's insurance and business office to get the answer. I will wait on that. I am not ready, today, because it would merely be hypothetical. I will wait until I get the CT scan done, and Hemosapien and Gooday have actually consulted, and the actual chemotherapy course has been decided, then I will be down to brass tacks. I am content for now.

Before I got off the phone with the young man, though, I had a question for him. "How is it," I asked, "that the cost of this therapy and its PPO discount are available to me after the fact on the insurance statement you send me every month, but you cannot tell me before hand because of a contractual obligation? It's not like you don't share the information with me. If you can't tell me now, how is it that you can tell me then?"

Of course, my question was merely rhetorical, as this young man was not a policymaker. He stammered and stuttered, was as polite as he could be, trying to think of something that would satisfy me, and no doubt worrying because he was unable to do so, when I let him off the hook. Today, this young man is not a policymaker; but he may well be one in the future. Perhaps he is the very person that one day will decide that the way things have been done in the past are no longer acceptable. HE may be the very one to CHANGE the policy. He may do so because he remembers the conversation he had with me. We can all be instruments of change, influencing how things are done in the future, if we poke, prod, and question things that don't make sense to us. I wish that young man well. May he go far and bring sense, order, and competence in every capacity he serves those who would employ him, and may they recognize him and reward him for his good work with increasingly larger paychecks and organizational responsibility, and may he find joy and pleasure in his work.

Now the \$11,760 per cycle of FCR is the only quote I have received at this point. I'd love to be able to entertain competitive bids, like we do in the construction industry, but I think this may be hard to pull off. If I were able, perhaps it might go like this.

Announcement: On August 1, 2009, Mississippi Chris will be receiving competitive bids on six cycles of FCR chemotherapy, FOB Porterville, Mississippi. Interested bidders may obtain the complete bid specifications from Hemosapien's office. A bid bond in the amount of 10% of the bid is required. Bids received after the bid opening time will be returned to the sender unopened. Mississippi Chris reserves the right to reject any and all bids, to waive informalities, and to enter into negotiations with the apparent low bidder. Unit prices will govern, and Mississippi Chris reserves the right to buy individual units from multiple vendors.

Now if we put it out for bid like this, Hemosapien would not actually be the one who does the work, but the work would be done under his scrutiny and supervision. He would help me evaluate the bids. The bid tabulations, when received, would probably look like this.

Bidder	Price Per Cycle	Extended Price	Exceptions	Hemosapien's Remarks and recommendations
Cancer Treatment Centers of Somalia	315.00	1,890.00	FOB Somalian Lawless district	Must become Somalian Citizen. Treatment only offered in Somalia.

Sammy's Used Cars, Pawn Shop, and Payday Loan Center	1,995.00	11,970.00	No insurance accepted. Cash price only.	No money down financing available through affiliated company, no interest for 90 days. APR 133.7605% Note: This treatment is past expiration date. Recently pawned by an old widow.
Coy's Beer, Bait, and Chemo One Stop	7,320.00	43,920.00	No Bid Bond Included	Comes with free case of your choice of domestic beer.
Bubba's Quick Clinic	8,450.00	50,700.00	Medicine not in stock at this time. Subject to availability. Could be as long as one year until medicine is available.	They are cheaper, but don't have it.
Medical School Student Loan Pay-Off Clinic, Inc.	10,125.00	60,750.00	FOB Clinic ONLY.	Won't Deliver
Young-Struggling Doctor's, PLLC	11,250.00	67,500.00	None	Lowest responsive bid with no exceptions
Established Competent Physician's Group, LLC	11,760.00	70,560.00	None	None
Prestigious Oncology Country Club of Mississippi	47,775.00	286,650.00	None	They don't want your business. Just look at the price. That's one of those, "We're way too busy to be bothered with all of this, but if you'll pay this price, we'll be glad to come treat you" prices. You just want treatment; you don't want to pay for the whole country club. And I thought these guys were my friends. Sheeesh!
Big-shot Doctors, PLLC	47,774.95	286,649.70	None	I knew they all knew each other, but I didn't actually expect any collusion. Gee Whiz! I'm disappointed here. Sorry.
Big-as-Texas Cancer Center	Unable to bid			Unable to bid at this time due to massive work load

Hemosapien and I would then get together to discuss the bids

Me: *Did you check and see what kind of beer Coy has?*

Hemosapien: *Coy did not include a bid bond. I have rejected his bid.*

Me: *Well now don't be so hasty. Do you think he can deliver?*

Hemosapien: *from the references I was able to check with, I think there's some serious doubt about his timely delivery of any clinically useful quantities of FCR.*

Me: *I was talking about the beer!*

Hemosapien (impatiently): *Is it beer we're trying to purchase here, or chemotherapy? Please try to stay focused on why we're here.*

Me (indignantly): *Well, I was going to split the case with you. Don't you like free beer?*

Hemosapien: *With what you're paying me, I don't need free beer. Can we move on now?*

Me (with resignation): *I suppose so.*

Hemosapien: *It looks like we'll have to go with the Young Struggling Doctors' Group. They have the lowest and the best bid. I am concerned about a couple of them, but I'll be able to supervise them properly, I think.*

Me: *You think?*

Hemosapien: *There's no guarantees here.*

Me (with a sigh): *Professionals! The more education one has, the less one is legally required to be responsible. How did the world get to this sorry state? A bricklayer is responsible. A plumber is responsible. The yard boy is responsible.*

Hemosapien: *Well, don't chide me about it. YOU non-professionals elected mostly lawyers to write the laws. How do you think the loopholes got there?*

Me: *Ok, the young-struggling doctors it is then. By the way, what's this apparent collusion going on with the Hot Shot Doctors and the big Country Club Doctors?*

Hemosapien: *That's kind of embarrassing. I expected more out of them. I already explained that on the bid tabulation. Let's not discuss that anymore, please.*

Me (smirking with self-righteousness): *OK. How about you taking some of that large quantity of money I'm paying you and buy me a cold beer?*

Hemosapien: *I'd be happy to!*

And off we'd go! No more discussing cancer, chemotherapy, Somalian health care, or any of those things, nothing but how we thought Ole Miss would do this season, our plans for the upcoming hunting season, rifles, pistols, bullets, camouflage, guitars, and all those things that make our sometimes otherwise mundane lives enjoyable.

THAT IS HOW IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN if purchasing medical care were like a construction project! As complicated as the bid tabulations seem to be, getting information to make decisions when purchasing health care is far more complex. So, readers, as soon as I get the real answers, and I will get the answers, I'll get back to you, via this blog, on what it costs, in real dollars and cents, to have this chemotherapy.

Hemosapien wrote me this in an e-mail yesterday: *Blog was good to see issues from your side.*

Is he a good sport, or what? I am thankful for that!

By the way, it is the READER's responsibility to differentiate between fluff and substance here. Is there substance? I sure hope so. Is there fluff? Well, of course there is!

7/16/09([an aside: Thanks, Rachel, for your encouraging e-mail. Enjoy your camping trip.])

7/22/09 5:04 am Results of my CT Scan

7/22/09 Yesterday, I had my CT scan done. I was furnished a sumptuous banana-flavored barium drink earlier, which I was to drink as per the directions the night before yesterday's CT scan. Banana flavored 2% barium suspension in lieu of morning coffee does not make one jump for joy.

The results of the CT scan? I got this e-mail from Hemosapien yesterday afternoon.

Your scan results are unchanged compared to Nov 2008--scattered lymph nodes without change in size and slight splenomegaly, also unchanged. I'm contacting Dr Gooday later today by email.

Unchanged is welcome news! Since my CT scan indicates no change, and my blood work indicates progression, but not to the point that has been previously indicated to require immediate attention, the conference between Hemosapien and Gooday might well indicate that I will not receive chemotherapy at this time. I am not them, though, so I will wait and see before making up my mind about what they *MIGHT* say!

What about the formerly mildly uncomfortable but now painful lymph nodes I have? *(Aside: you proper grammartarians out there, I just love to use as many adverbs in a row as sounds good to my ear. Just ask my band mate, Cletus . . . he'll confirm that! I will continue to do so, regardless of what y'all may be cleverly smugly thinking.)*

It could be merely paranoia. A new pain shows up in the form of aching shoulders one morning. My mind races uncontrollably, asking myself, "Is it some new development with the CLL?"

"Could be," I answer.

"What should I do?" I ask.

"Call up the funeral home and make sure that all your planned final arrangements have been properly taken care of."

"Isn't that a little drastic?" I ask myself.

"Well, you asked what to do. I was just laying out one reasonable option for you," I reply.

"Gee whiz! Get a life!" I answer myself back.

Let's look further at this.

New problem: Painful Shoulder Joints

Possible Causes:

1. Slept too little

2. Slept too much
3. Typical aches and pains one encounters when one is over 50 years old
4. Too much manual activity the day before
5. Not enough manual activity the day before
6. Forgot to take the ibuprofen
7. Wife beat you about the head and shoulders while you were asleep
8. Wickedly, strangely, suddenly, and nefariously, a twist in the CLL is subjecting you to a potentially immediately deadly syndrome, heretofore unheard of by the medical experts, that manifests first as merely achy shoulders but ultimately turns out to be like a combination of leprosy, Ebola, and infection with flesh-eating bacteria, possibly immediately causing you to die in a screaming, steamy, melting pile, with nothing left but dirty, stinky clothes like the wicked witch of the West.

I reject them all out of hand, except for possibly number 7, and focus on number 8 as the obvious answer.

If this is mere paranoia, then I will forgive myself this time but promise myself to do better in the future. I'd be ashamed to see Neil Earth-Planter now. He'd say that that is just the kind of thinking that will kill you.

So much to learn about myself!

7/20/09 Swapping Clarity for Cynicism

This past weekend was a delightful diversion from the July norm in Mississippi, with mornings in the high 50's, bright but not weighty sunshine, low humidity; almost alpine in nature. I am thankful for that. My friend CP came up for a visit. We giggled like schoolgirls all day, drove for miles and miles through the woods, and wound up down at a pond where we enjoyed some



target shooting. CP likes to shoot, as well, but has not done so in a while. We both like the smell of burnt powder. Then, Livi, my granddaughter, spent the night with us and, in fact, will spend the next few days since her mother and dad are gone on a trip to Gulf Shores. Canaan's buddies came over yesterday evening and they all went swimming. When one has his bride, his granddaughter, close friends, his son and his son's friends all about, it is hard to spend one's time focusing on the things one can do nothing about. And why should one do so,

anyway? It was a good weekend. The photo to the left is me standing on my front porch, overlooking the grounds at Timberview Lodge. I see this every day! I am thankful for that!

On another note: I sure enjoyed playing my guitar yesterday. The notes were just exploding off the sound board. Is it my guitar, itself, pleased at the return of the loving caresses it formerly enjoyed? Is it me, enjoying the guitar and music that I love so much? Is it merely my motor memory, thrilling at the exercise like a racehorse out for a trot on a cool, autumn morning? Is it all of them? Is it none of them? It is curious, though. I have had to MAKE myself play any music when it was just me around. Yesterday, I did not have to force myself. I am pleasingly puzzled by the change.

Tomorrow, I am off for my full-body CT scan, then to see Mainmost. We'll see what he has to say. Then, Hemopsapien will review the CT scan and talk to Gooday, whereupon they will decide what course of treatment I need at this time. It will be what it will be. I did not spend much time worrying about it this weekend.

I got an e-mail from my old friend Beet-Boy in Illinois. I have missed him so. He is a remarkable person: as interested in as many different things as I am, except that his interest in those things takes him to a far greater level of depth than I seem to be able to reach, since I am always LEARNING something from him. It is doubtful that he has ever learned anything from me.

He read my blog on my website and I got this e-mail from him:

Hey...when did you learn to write !!!!!

BB

I answered back:

I think that might have been a compliment. We've had writing in Mississippi since William Faulkner was born. Reading, on the other hand, was not introduced here until LBJ's "Great Society" program. We're hoping Obama's new Great Societiesque programs will enable us to learn to cipher. Then, we'll be able to get rid of this third-world status the rest of the nation hobbles us with.

I hope he thought that was funny. I hope that the rest of the nation learns that Mississippi has long since shed the hobbles others furnished for our own good. While the rest of the nation has gotten on about its business, the South slipped its hobbles and has quietly, but decisively, moved on to greener pastures others sought to keep for themselves. Now THAT is ironic humor!

What has any of that to do with a blog about someone's experiences with CLL? Some would say not much, but I would offer that a chronic disease becoming a permanent fixture in one's life alters that life so that one's life's experiences are now viewed through a different lens. A different lens can obscure some things and clarify others. It is the new clarity I find interesting, and the internal debate constantly going on about whether this new clarity is really clarity at all. Is it a widening of perspective or a narrowing of perspective? I can't answer that yet, but I do know that it is new.

"New and improved," says the TV commercial for laundry detergent.

"New and improved," said the late, great telemarketer, Ron Popeil, about his latest gadget.

"New and improved," said my insurance agent as we went over the renewal on my auto and homeowner's policy.

"New and improved," it says on the box of Q-tips I asked Debbie to pick up for me yesterday.

"New and improved," said Gooday and Hemopsapien about the treatment I would be receiving.

"New and improved," I say to myself, about my attitude.

Truth is hard to measure when the tools we have are so imprecise.

I close my eyes and imagine the late Billy Mays, modern telemarketing pitch-man, who someone, somewhere, deemed worthy of a TV reality show, shouting at me, "The new and improved Truth-o-meter! Only \$19.95. And if you order now, We'll throw in a full course of chemotherapy, just pay separate shipping and handling!"

While my attitude is new, is it improved? Torn between sincerity and the darkest, brooding cynicism, I throw back my head and guffaw with laughter at myself.

Someone wiser than I once said this:

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon. Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Therefore, take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or What shall we drink? or Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.

Now, it is off to other things, the sufficiently evil things of the day making their own demands on my time . . .

7/22/09 Silly Me

Got this e-mail from Hemosapien, which I promptly misinterpreted because of the nature of the formatting of "Reply-All" e-mails.:

Remember this is CLL leukemia-main body of cancer cells in the blood. We know the blood component (lymph count) has increased. Yes, there is overlap with lymph nodes (cll/sll) but it is the same cancer in this case whether it be in the blood or node.

(Imbedded in Hemosapien's e-mail to me) From Gooday: I think he should start fcr as soon as feasible, he doesn't need lite [referring to a different version of FCR, lighter on the F&C] we could start him here if he wishes. Would make follow up easier.

*Let me know what you decide. I will be out until Monday beginning in the am.
Hemosapien*

E-mail back to Hemosapien:

*It would be rather **silly** for me to think that you were reminding Gooday about the nature of how CLL works, so the first part of your e-mail must be for me! When you call, please let me know your honest thoughts on me starting the chemo there, and what "starting" me there means. Would I start there and finish here? Do you perceive any benefit for me in doing that? If so, what would that benefit be? The usually-so-confident me is now asking for your help in deciding.*

Your obedient patient,

Chris

Bravado and chutzpah have just flown right out the window with this one.

He called back at 3:15PM. He honestly answered my questions and left it up to me to decide. The things we discussed:

1. The FC-R regime consists of at least 6 each 28 day cycles.
2. During a cycle, I would take FC-R infusions for three days during the first week of the cycle.
3. I would go for weekly blood monitoring during the rest of the cycle.
4. A standard chemotherapy course has a factor for body surface area. Since I am a bit overweight at the moment, my factor would be 2.5.
5. He would start me right away on Allopurinol, Acyclovir, and Bactrim, and one other drug which would prevent damage to my kidneys.

I asked him what side effects from FC-R he had observed in his patients. He indicated that he had not given FC-R to any patients in his year as a physician in this clinic. (Apparently he also did not give it to anyone as a hematology and oncology resident at the University of Mississippi Medical Center, either) We discussed this. He indicated that I was welcome to go to Houston to

take the chemotherapy if I was concerned about his lack of experience, and he would understand.

He did indicate that if I started the chemotherapy in Houston, I should take the full course in Houston. Someone had to administer it and monitor my blood during the next 6 months. I surmised on my own that that would mean the better part of one week in Houston per month, and weekly trips to Houston for monitoring. This seems terribly inconvenient. Ironically, I'm facing six months of chemotherapy and I'm looking at my convenience. What an interesting juxtaposition: Deadly serious business and convenience!

I have e-mailed Gooday and asked him if it is possible for me to take my therapy here and still come to Houston for annual (or as recommended) checkups. We'll see what he has to say.

Unless there is some new development, the plan is to start chemo on August 10, 2009. Hemosapien wanted to start it on August 3, but I wanted to wait until the August 7, 2009, Sucarnochee Revue was behind me. Nothing like scheduling chemotherapy around a radio show!

For some reason, I had a fleeting vision of myself as a gambler at one of Mississippi's Gulf coast casinos. I'm not sure which one, but it was a nice one. I saw myself leaning over the rail at a craps table, the dice in my hand.

*I've established my point, **five**. To win, I've got to roll a **five** before I roll a **seven**. On the green felt of the table, on the **PASS LINE**, lies one of the only two chips I have. It seems to have a skull and crossbones in the center surrounded by the legend "Deadly Serious Business!" There is no denomination the one chip I have wagered, just that strange legend. The only other chip I have is in my left hand. It is just like the one I place on the table. Everyone else's chips seem normal.*

*Some have placed their bets on the **PASS** line, and others have placed their bets on the **DON'T PASS** line. No one has yet placed a bet on the hard **FIVE**. I lean over and place the last of my one remaining strange chips onto the green felt, right on top of the **FIVE**. The casino floor has fallen silent. Everyone stops, slow-motion, and ever so slightly perceptibly turning their heads to look at me with questioning eyes: eyes that accuse, eyes that blame, eyes that opine about things to which they are not privy.*

At the far corner, with stern looks on their faces, I see eyes I recognize, eyes that have recognition in them. Gooday and Hemosapien are bellied up to the table, each holding a "Deadly Serious Business" chip in his hand, just staring, pensive, thinking. The dice feel so heavy in my sweaty hand. Heavier, still!

I blow on the dice in my clenched fist, and I start shaking them. At once, the entire casino floor becomes alive with activity. Shouts, cat-calls, whistles, the sounds of slot machines in action, the sounds of tokens hitting the steel buckets designed to make as much noise as possible; croupiers taking chips from betters, their sticks pushing the chips to the spots where they should be; pit-bosses watching everything like hawks watching field-mice from their perches on power lines; women with too much red rouge and red lipstick, laughing too loud and talking too loud, their arms around men who are not their husbands; unwashed, dark-haired, oily-haired men, unshaven gray beards, with tremendously ridiculous gold jewelry around their necks, their arms around women who are not their wives; a few people gambling

with their rent money, others their mortgage payment, and some, gambling on the last cash advance they could get on their credit card, and me, blowing and rattling, blowing and rattling, and blowing and rattling these dice in my hand, afraid to let them go, afraid that the next number will be a seven, and wondering beyond all wonder just how I came to be in this place.

I hesitate, the sweat dripping down my brow into my eyes. I glance back up at Gooday and Hemosapien. They simultaneously lean over and put their chips on the table and say to the dealer, "hard five," and look up at me. Hemosapien offers a smile and a shout of encouragement, and Gooday, a big wink! They came here for me. They are with me. They think I can do it. They are not against me. They are on my side.

A huge crowd has gathered. The craps table is literally a sea of swarming, snarling humanity. I am shocked to see that the people who have gathered in the outer concentric ellipses around the table are my family and friends. I see my wife and children. I see all my close family and friends. I even see my Aunt Ann and wonder, intensely but briefly, what she is doing here in a casino; it seems so out of place for her and was, no doubt, difficult for her to step foot into this place. She's here because she's rooting for me, too! For a brief, puzzling second, I think I see my grandmother. A sudden commotion erupts and I see my brother push his way from the back of the crowd to the rail. He takes a quarter from his pocket and flips it onto the table and says, "Put it on the five!" The dealers refuse this bet which is far below the minimum, and my brother, again, "I said put it on the five!" The dealers look around in confusion when the pit boss steps over to my brother. They whisper something to each other, shake hands, and the pit boss says, "I'll allow it. Put his bet on the five." The crowd, completely unaware of the real value of that quarter, is puzzled for an instant but quickly forgets it, their interest returning to the dice in my hand. I am certain I can hear the voices calling from the distant past, particularly Mr. Kennon, saying, calmly, slowly, deliberately, "You can do this, son. A sure eye, a steady hand, and a deliberate pull of the trigger," as if I were looking down the barrel of a shotgun at a bird on the wing. I look around for him, but cannot find him. I can also hear my pulse buzzing and ringing in my ears. I think that my blood pressure must be so high I will fall over dead in a fit of apoplexy at any instant.

And over the din, hum, and throbbing tension, I am certain I can hear Ed Dye's voice. It's got to be him. It must be him. Of course, it's not him, but I look around anyway. I hear him again! "Throw them ol' bones, son! Let 'em fly! You can't stand there and hold them all day! You've got to let 'em go!" I hear his voice piercing so clearly through the noise of the crowd, his best vaudevillian stage voice.

I grin to myself now having the confidence to let the dice go. I give the dice one final blow and rattle. Everyone cheers, the air pregnant with the tension, the noise rising to a cacophonously belligerent level. The crowd belches forth a big roar as I wind-up and let them fly across the table, each balanced and precision manufactured-random number generator bouncing and jerking erratically on their square points, striking the diamond studded foam at the back wall of the table, twirling and spinning furiously on the felt as they come to rest on their flat surfaces . . .

7/28/09 Control and the Lack Thereof

I have always felt like I was in control of the circumstances in my life. Perhaps this was youth. Perhaps it was because my life has been so blessed with a bountiful harvest that I have gathered even where I have not sown. Perhaps it is human arrogance. Perhaps it was because I felt like **Ozymandias** once felt, and having drunk the heady wine of arrogance, now feel like the observer of **Ozymandias'** remains felt, or perhaps how we all feel **Ozymandias** should have felt. Perhaps that arrogance is gone now, leaving only persistence behind.

What did I ever actually have control of, I wonder? The answer: *I mostly had control over the illusion that I was in control.* Some people live their whole lives with this illusion before dying suddenly, without warning, from circumstances over which they had no control; thus, the illusion remains intact right up to the point they say, "Uh-oh!" Others maintain that illusion for most of their lives until, circumstances intervening, things happen to make the illusion vanish. For some, the destruction of that illusion is the surrendering of their will to fight for their place, the illusion being replaced with a stagnating resignation. Still more others accept the intervening circumstances, recognize that they can no longer maintain the illusion of control over the affected aspect of their life, and focus their control mechanisms on the things that remain, enjoying the illusion that they at least maintain control over some aspect of their life. Some just roll with the flow: the tree that sways in the wind, the log that gets carried off by the river's current, the fish that live in ever changing tidal pools.

The science of ballistics teaches us that—the laws of physics being known—a certain weight bullet of a certain drag coefficient, placed in a cartridge of a certain size charge of a known powder, then placed in a rifle of a certain barrel length with a certain twist in the rifling grooves, when fired, will strike a downrange target at a predetermined point. A consistent cartridge/bullet combination in a quality firearm will strike the target in the predetermined location with remarkable accuracy. It will do it every time. This is called control. Insert all the variables one may face and the predictability of the bullet is much less certain. The hitting of the TARGET is even more uncertain.

What would those variables be?

- The steadiness of the shooter
- The manufacturing consistency of every component of the cartridge
- The consistency of the assembly of the cartridge components
- The precision of the rifle
- The wind
- A moving target

So many processes involved, so many materials, so many machines, hands, procedures, checks, and balances involved in the manufacture of a bullet and its components, in the rifle and its components, and an infinite number of variables involved with the SHOOTER, the shooter's environment, and the TARGET. With this seemingly infinite number of variables, it makes one wonder how ANY target can be consistently hit. YET THEY CAN, and with remarkable predictability. Isn't this amazing?

Longing for some sense of control and sorely lacking, I am reduced to reminding myself that I CAN hit the target I shoot at, but I have no control over the manufacture of the gunpowder, primer, bullet, or brass casing in the rifle cartridge. I trust the cartridge manufacturer to do all of that. I have no control, so I rely on someone else. I HAVE to rely on someone else.

Now, quickly, from ballistics to health care: How many more variables does one encounter when facing treatment for a disease like CLL? My mind wearies at the thought. Relying on someone else is an understatement when it comes to chemotherapy. A vision of one of those flashing, moveable letter signs, against which local municipalities love to pass ordinances, comes to mind. "**Joe's Corner Market, Bullets and Bait, Self Service Car-Wash and Chemotherapy**," it flashes to the folks driving past. Now, I am completely reliant on someone else, and things go from merely complex to incredibly complicated.

Gooday and Hemosapien had previously agreed, "FCR for you, son!"

On July 22, I sent this e-mail to Gooday:

Dear Gooday:

You have communicated with my local Hematologist, Hemosapien.

You and he are in agreement that I should start FCR chemotherapy as soon as feasible.

You indicated when I saw you in January of 09, that I could take my treatments here in Meridian, Mississippi, and still come to you for follow-up visits as necessary. My next appointment to see you is this coming January.

*I would like to take my treatments here.
I would still like to see you in January.*

Is that possible?

Best regards,

Chris

I did not hear anything back from him, so I sent a reminder today. Almost immediately, I got this back, blue type, capital letters, and all.

DEAR CHRIS. FCR IS NOW STANDARD. TO BE FOLLOWED HERE FOR CONTINUED MONITORING YOU WOULD NEED TO BE REGISTERED ON AN FCR PROTOCOL, WHICH IS NOT CUMBERSOME BUT WOULD GIVE YOU ACCESS TO OUR RESEARCH NURSES SPECIAL TESTS ETC. IF YOU WISH TO DO SO LET US KNOW. OTHERWISE HEMOSAPIEN CAN START AS SOON AS YOU WISH.

I read that, reread it, and reread it again and decided that this was just not enough information to know what it meant. I could only surmise what registering for an FCR protocol consisted of. I better get the facts, and having previously observed Gooday's terse e-mails, perhaps I should call his assistant. She could interpret this e-mail for me. I was surprised

when I get her on the phone in real time, rather than her voice mail. I tell her who I am, give her my patient number, and read her the e-mail. She says that she would get Gooday to call me, as he could better explain what he meant by that e-mail than she.

I expect he'll call me at some point when I am where I cannot get a cell phone signal or in a noisy environment and cannot hear the phone ring, but no, he calls me back right away. I am surprised.

"The FCR protocol," he said, "is not a clinical trial, but a protocol whereby we collect data following the course of treatment, so we can have solid data to track patient's progress and responses to the treatment throughout the course of the disease."

I told him that Hemosapien was reluctant for me to start the chemotherapy at Big-as-Texas Cancer Center and felt that if I started there, I should finish there. Gooday's indications were that lots of people were on the protocol and received treatment in their hometowns all the time. He did not see any reason why Hemosapien should have an objection to my being a part of the protocol but would be glad to talk to Hemosapien about it.

Thus having the information I needed, our conversation ended.

I called Hemosapien's office and left a message for him to call me back.

His office called me right back, not nurse J, but another nurse. She wanted to know if she could help me. I told her no, knowing that what I wanted to discuss was not going to be within her scope of authority. She indicated that Hemosapien was not in, but would be back tomorrow, and that she would have him call me.

I dashed off the following e-mail so that he would know why I called and perhaps have an answer for me. I copied Gooday on the e-mail and included everyone's phone numbers.

Dear Hemosapien:

I left a message for you to call me on my cell phone. I am on the campus of Ole Miss, and I hate that I have to rely on this cell phone, fearful that I might miss your call.

I want to participate in the FCR protocol at Big-as-Texas. I still want to take my treatments here at home. I spoke to Gooday this afternoon, and he indicated that the information they collect under the protocol is beneficial and serves the CLL community at large (We are all a part of this!). He has also indicated that to be a part of the protocol, I would have to take my first treatment there, over the course of a weekend, at Big-as-Texas Cancer Center. The rest of my treatments would be taken in Meridian.

I am not willing to burn any bridges and am asking you if it is possible for me to be a part of this protocol while still being your patient and receiving the rest of my treatment in Meridian.

Not being a physician, I do not know the things that are important to physicians; I just know what is important to me - that being the both of you.

Gooday said he welcomed your call to discuss this.

Thanks

While waiting for Hemosapien to call, I will return to the contemplation of ballistics.

Continuing from before, the bullet, once fired from the rifle, is sent on its ballistic course, now only affected by environmental variables and the variables of a moving target. Will it hit its intended point? If it doesn't, it won't be because I didn't take careful aim and squeeze the trigger, slowly, deliberately, prayerfully. Once the charge is ignited, I simply cannot control it anymore, if I ever did. It is as surely on the way to the destination determined BEFORE the trigger was pulled as the laws of physics can make it be, perhaps buffeted about by the wind, but definitely headed toward a pre-determined target, not necessarily the one I had in my sights. I simply cannot control it anymore, can't alter it, can't use the most demonstrative body english to influence it, can't reason with it, can't cajole it in to doing what I want, can't reprimand it into achieving the desired result, can't bribe it, or make clever promises to it on the hopes that it will be influenced, and I certainly can't call it back.

What shall I do now?

I think I'll twiddle my thumbs. Perhaps I'll go and fly a kite. Perhaps I'll tilt at a windmill. Perhaps I'll roar in the face of a hurricane, or give a grizzly bear a bare-handed bitch-slap. Perhaps I'll think of some other equally effective method of restoring the illusion of control.

I've already challenged God and asked him what was HE thinking when he let me come down with this malady. I asked Him did HE know what HE was doing up there, letting things get to this sorry state of affairs like they are. I found out that wouldn't work when out of a sudden whirlwind, HE answered me certainly and surely:

*Who is this that darkens counsel By words without knowledge?
Now gird up your loins like a man, And I will ask you, and you instruct Me!
Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell Me, if you have understanding,
Who set its measurements? Since you know. Or who stretched the line on it?
On what were its bases sunk? Or who laid its cornerstone,
When the morning stars sang together And all the sons of God shouted for joy?
Or who enclosed the sea with doors When, bursting forth, it went out from the womb;
When I made a cloud its garment And thick darkness its swaddling band,
And I placed boundaries on it And set a bolt and doors,
And I said, 'Thus far you shall come, but no farther; And here shall your proud waves stop'?*

*Have you ever in your life commanded the morning, And caused the dawn to know its place,
That it might take hold of the ends of the earth, And the wicked be shaken out of it?
It is changed like clay under the seal; And they stand forth like a garment.
From the wicked, their light is withheld, And the uplifted arm is broken.
Have you entered into the springs of the sea Or walked in the recesses of the deep?
Have the gates of death been revealed to you, Or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?
Have you understood the expanse of the earth? Tell Me, if you know all this.
Where is the way to the dwelling of light? And darkness, where is its place,
That you may take it to its territory And that you may discern the paths to its home?
You know, for you were born then, And the number of your days is great!*

*Have you entered the storehouses of the snow, Or have you seen the storehouses of the hail,
Which I have reserved for the time of distress, For the day of war and battle?
Where is the way that the light is divided, Or the east wind scattered on the earth?
Who has cleft a channel for the flood, Or a way for the thunderbolt,
To bring rain on a land without people, On a desert without a man in it,
To satisfy the waste and desolate land And to make the seeds of grass to sprout?
Has the rain a father? Or who has begotten the drops of dew?
From whose womb has come the ice? And the frost of heaven, who has given it birth?
Water becomes hard like stone, And the surface of the deep is imprisoned.
Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades, Or loose the cords of Orion?
Can you lead forth a constellation in its season, And guide the Bear with her satellites?
Do you know the ordinances of the heavens, Or fix their rule over the earth?
Can you lift up your voice to the clouds, So that an abundance of water will cover you?
Can you send forth lightnings that they may go And say to you, 'Here we are'?*

*Who has put wisdom in the innermost being Or given understanding to the mind?
Who can count the clouds by wisdom, Or tip the water jars of the heavens,
When the dust hardens into a mass And the clods stick together?*

*Can you hunt the prey for the lion, Or satisfy the appetite of the young lions,
When they crouch in their dens And lie in wait in their lair?*

*Who prepares for the raven its nourishment When its young cry to God And wander about
without food?*

*Do you know the time the mountain goats give birth? Do you observe the calving of the deer?
Can you count the months they fulfill, Or do you know the time they give birth?
They kneel down, they bring forth their young, They get rid of their labor pains.
Their offspring become strong, they grow up in the open field;
They leave and do not return to them.*

*Who sent out the wild donkey free? And who loosed the bonds of the swift donkey,
To whom I gave the wilderness for a home And the salt land for his dwelling place?
He scorns the tumult of the city, The shoutings of the driver he does not hear.
He explores the mountains for his pasture And searches after every green thing.
Will the wild ox consent to serve you, Or will he spend the night at your manger?*

*Can you bind the wild ox in a furrow with ropes, Or will he harrow the valleys after you?
Will you trust him because his strength is great And leave your labor to him?
Will you have faith in him that he will return your grain And gather it from your threshing
floor?*

*The ostriches' wings flap joyously With the pinion and plumage of love,
For she abandons her eggs to the earth And warms them in the dust,
And she forgets that a foot may crush them, Or that a wild beast may trample them.
She treats her young cruelly, as if they were not hers; Though her labor be in vain, she is
unconcerned;*

*Because God has made her forget wisdom, And has not given her a share of understanding.
When she lifts herself on high, She laughs at the horse and his rider.*

*Do you give the horse his might? Do you clothe his neck with a mane?
Do you make him leap like the locust? His majestic snorting is terrible.
He paws in the valley, and rejoices in his strength; He goes out to meet the weapons.
He laughs at fear and is not dismayed; And he does not turn back from the sword.
The quiver rattles against him, The flashing spear and javelin.
With shaking and rage, he races over the ground, And he does not stand still at the voice of the trumpet.
As often as the trumpet sounds he says, 'Aha!' And he scents the battle from afar,
And the thunder of the captains and the war cry.*

Is it by your understanding that the hawk soars, Stretching his wings toward the south?

*Is it at your command that the eagle mounts up And makes his nest on high?
On the cliff, he dwells and lodges, Upon the rocky crag, an inaccessible place.
From there he spies out food; His eyes see it from afar.
His young ones also suck up blood; And where the slain are, there is he."*

Then the LORD said to me:

Will the faultfinder contend with the Almighty? Let him who reproves God answer it.

Feeling the weight of my arrogant thinking, my only reply was:

I am insignificant; what can I reply to You? I lay my hand on my mouth. Once I have spoken, and I will not answer; Even twice, and I will add nothing more.

Then the LORD answered out of the storm and said,

Now gird up your loins like a man; I will ask you, and you instruct Me. Will you really annul My judgment? Will you condemn Me that you may be justified? . . .

I, very wisely by this time, could only make the following reply:

I take back my words. I repent in dust and ashes.

Of course, I have appropriated chapters 39 through 42 of the book of Job for my own purposes. But I am confirming that even though GOD said it to Job, HE SAID IT TO ME. It's great to realize that the picture I see is not the big one, that I am as in control of my life as I ever was. Am I a fatalist? No. Am I a predestined for all things Calvinist? No, I can't say that either. Can I choose? Yes, right here, and right now, in real time, I have the ability to choose. Do I think that chaos rules the universe? I think chaotic things do happen, but I am not so foolish to believe that chaos is in the driver's seat. Is GOD in control? If you'll read the previous conversation, I will remind you that I have just painfully learned not to question GOD on such matters; I am not wasting that lesson by immediately second guessing HIM while the lesson is still fresh in my mind.

Old Job not only fired and missed, it looks like his gun misfired completely, or perhaps he struck an unintended target. Then one reads the last verse of the book. The REALLY interesting part is the last sentence of the last verse of the book of Job.

Then Job died, old and full of days.

The lesson is not wasted.

7/29/09 Relinquish Control and Hit Your Target

Why not?

After reading and pondering over the book of Job yesterday evening, I decided that I was remiss in not taking my concern to the LORD. I prayed that He would intervene and work things out so that I could take my treatments in Meridian yet still be part of the Big-as-Texas Cancer Center FCR Protocol, which would allow me to be continuously monitored by Gooday and his staff. I didn't FEEL any better after praying about this, but I had faith that the LORD heard my prayer. I didn't get all warm and fuzzy and sigh with good feelings about everything because that would have been simply feelings. Faith is much different. I prayed, and by faith, I knew I would receive my answer. It is possible that my answer, having been received, would not be the one I was looking for. Sometimes the answer is, "No!" Sometimes it is, "Not yet." This time, that was not the case. GOD does not do parlor tricks wherein we say the magic words we think HE wants to hear and He is then persuaded to do our bidding. We sometimes think prayer works that way. We are frequently disappointed.

I am not without resources. The seen ones are all around me. They come by and speak, say hello, give me a hug or a smile, then move along about their business. They call me on the phone and wish me well, then move along about their business. They do things on my behalf with a will. They do things on my behalf when they actually don't feel like it. They do things on my behalf without even knowing why. They are motivated by their desire for my well being. They are motivated by their own professionalism. They are motivated without knowing why, other than for some strange reason they are experiencing an intense motivation. The seen resources are powerful, but the unseen resources are far more powerful. They are the prime mover. They are the motivator. I have faith that those unseen resources exist. Long, long ago, a very influential man who devoted his entire life to the study of such things wrote, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

THE SUBSTANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR . . .

The writer indicates that our hopes are more than wishes. The import is that things hoped for have substance, and that substance is faith.

THE EVIDENCE OF THINGS UNSEEN . . .

The writer certainly believed unseen things exist, and so do I. He indicates that my faith in those things is evidence of their existence. To some, the argument may be circular, but what argument prevails in the face of faith? Facts or faith? Sometimes the two seem to be in polar opposition. Sometimes, they are so close as to be inseparable. It is easy to have faith when facts and faith are conjoined, and far more challenging and difficult when they appear to be diametrically opposite. Each person must decide for himself.

Hemosapien called me back this morning. After we exchanged greetings, I asked him if he had read my e-mail which explained what I had called him about. He indicated that he had not, yet, but would pull it up as we spoke. As I was telling him about my desire to participate and he was listening and reading my e-mail at the same time, he politely interrupted me. The voice in my head said, "Be quiet now and hear what he has to say"

I know that voice! I shut up immediately.

Hemosapien went on to say that he had been studying and had read the 2005 Protocol published by Gooday. He was in complete agreement with what was to be done and how this would be beneficial to his patients, other health-care providers, Leukemia research and treatment the world over, his own clinic, and for him and me—him, professionally, and me, personally.

"I do not have any problem with you participating in the FCR protocol, starting your treatment there, and finishing it here," he said. I thanked him and we then talked about his upcoming hunting trip, where he would be going, what he was planning on hunting, and how he still might be gone on his trip when I returned from Texas and needed to see him for follow-up.

"Do I need to hope that you bag your limit your first couple of days, out?" I asked.

"You could," he said, "but I have a reserve trip planned in case that happens. I plan to be gone the full length of time I have allotted."

"Well, have a safe trip and bag a big one, then! I'm sure I'll be in the good hands of one of your colleagues at your clinic while you're gone." Our conversation finished, we said goodbye and hung up, with me thanking him one more time.

When I hung up, I thanked the LORD, out loud, for this real-time manifestation of the substance of things hoped for.

I am simultaneously humbled and moved that Hemosapien and Gooday took time out of their schedules to make sure I understood how things worked, provided me with all the information so I could make an informed decision, and went the extra mile when things did not seem to be working out the way I had planned. Hemopsapien even went so far as to research and study on his own time to find out how he might better serve me and, in the long run, the rest of his patients for a generation to come.

What might have motivated them to take this time and do these things?

Might it have been their desire to better serve their patients? There is no doubt about that.

Might it have been the fact that they had a persistent, perhaps even pesky, patient, who wasn't afraid to ask questions and let his desires be known, and did not fall silent on the first reproach? To quote my friend, record producer Murray K., "It couldn't hurt!"

Might it be because they know that I am writing about this, and hundreds of people are reading it, and though they are disguised with nicknames, their disguise is a very thin one? I thought about that and rejected it out of hand. I would be too pompous in giving MYSELF credit. Too pompous, too egocentric, and too dangerous. Remember yesterday when I got the ***Where were you when I laid the foundations of the world*** speech delivered at point-blank range, right out of the whirlwind. No, that's too fresh in my memory. If I make that mistake again, it won't be any time soon. No, it definitely wasn't the clever craftiness of my writing.

Might it have been a simple thing all along, with me making a mountain out of a molehill? It's possible, I suppose, yet why did it seem so complicated if that were the case?

Might it have been evidence of things unseen? I hear some laughter at this notion, perhaps a knowing, sad shaking of a few heads at my naive simplicity.

The same man that wrote the words previously cited wrote this near the end of his life:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

If it were you that laughed before, then maybe you can laugh WITH me now. Nearly two-thousand years after they were written, those words are still bringing joy to many who hear them; me being just one. I hope that one day I can have such grace in the midst of such trials to be able to sincerely utter those words, so that by faith the substance of what I hope for may one day be revealed.

Ballistics once more: I loaded, I aimed, I pulled the trigger. The bullet went exactly where it was intended, or did I aim poorly and the wind blow it back onto its intended course. Instead of moving away from a carefully aimed bullet, did some unseen force push the target into the path of a poorly aimed bullet? So much to ponder, so little time!

Hemosapien? He knows a bit about ballistics, too. He's going Elk hunting. My hope for him on his trip? Here you go, Hemosapien.

When the big dominant bull elk steps out into the upwind clear, may he turn broadside to you, presenting himself in full view, his proud head held erect, his antlers reaching seemingly endlessly into the morning sky, bugling to the cows in his harem to come to him, his nose turned to the air, drunk on their scent. May the constant winds that blow in western climes fall still as death as you take careful aim with steady hands, first taking a deep breath then exhaling halfway, then deliberately and slowly squeezing the trigger, fire the rifle. May the ballistic course you set the bullet on be one that drops that big bull elk like a stone right where he stands without so much as a flinch or notice of anything other than the scent of receptive females in the air. May you easily cart him back to the camp. May you get your name in the record books. May your women and children look up to you with the light of love in their eyes, and your friends hold you in the high esteem of their admiration and respect, and then may you, those predatory urges deep seated in man being satisfied, basking in the glow of all that, hurry home safely, and being thus refreshed, treat me well for this leukemia of mine.

What now? I have emailed Gooday to indicate my participation in the protocol. August 10 chemo start date is now a moving target. I will start when scheduled by Big-as-Texas Cancer Center. I will take my first treatment there. The balance of my treatments will be taken in Meridian and administered by Hemosapien. I will be monitored by Gooday and his staff as well as Hemosapien and his staff. I get to mostly stay home. I get to have the convenience of local treatments. I get the comfort of knowing that I have access to Big-as-Texas Cancer Center.

Isn't that what I wanted all along?

More details as I know them.

7/30/09 My Obstreperous Friend John Calvin and August 10, 2009

[Calvinism](#) has always fascinated me, not that I can embrace it completely. But it has a certain allure and I am always tempted by its relentless manifestation. To absolutely and definitively, once and for all, separate foreknowledge from predestination is a job that no theologian has ever been able to accomplish, for Calvin will not be completely dismissed, thus his allure.

Why Calvin?

August 10, 2009, was determined by me and Hemosapien, earlier, to be the best date for me to start chemotherapy. Further information being necessary, discussions among doctors, and coordination between clinics whole states away required that this date be suspended in favor of some unspecified date in the future. After all has been revealed, discussed, coordinated, and thus settled, the formerly unspecified date for me to start chemotherapy has been determined to be August 10, 2009.

Calvin sternly looks down at me, winks, and says, "I told you so!"

We shall see.

I spoke with Nurse Susan at Big-as-Texas Cancer Center this morning. She is the research nurse for the [FCR Protocol](#). I am scheduled to report to Houston on Sunday, August 9, 2009, and start chemo there on August 10. First I will have lab work done, and then, unfortunately, another bone- marrow biopsy, which is about as pleasant perhaps as an amateur root canal would be when performed on one by a jilted, increasingly acerbic ex-wife. Of course, my bone-marrow biopsy performers will not be amateurs, but I suspect the unpleasantness will be the same as the aforementioned.

After the lab work and bone-marrow biopsy, I will begin with an infusion of [rituximab](#). Nurse Susan said that they have to give this over a course of 6 to 8 hours. Since it is a monoclonal anti-body, my own body will try to reject it, so it must be given slowly at first, with delivery accelerating only as my own body will allow it.

My train of thought is suddenly eclipsed by the notion of being at a neighborhood bar, watching a friend drinking his beer, who having begun sipping it slowly starts drinking at an ever increasing rate, which is so common among drinkers. The more they drink, the faster they drink.

"Hey, pal, you're starting to guzzle those down. You'd better be careful," I warn.

"Well, you're starting to suck that rituximab right on down, yourself," he retorts, peering over his glasses at the digital meter on the IV Chemo Infusion machine connected to tubes running to the vein in the inside bend of my elbow. Nurse Susan stands at attention adjusting the rate of flow by furiously yet competently pushing buttons on the keypad.

I study this for a moment and reply, "Well, this nurse with me is giving it to me. I can't help myself."

"Neither can I," he says to me with a shrug of his shoulders, then to the bartender, "Bring me TWO this time." Then again to the bartender, "Why does he come down here to do that?"

"Happy hour," says the bartender, "two for one on rituximab."

"I'll bet your health insurance company really likes that," he says to me.

"You'd think they would, but apparently they don't care. The policy is the policy. I'm trying to watch it, though, because I have an annual limit and this stuff is so expensive."

"More than a single malt scotch?" he asks.

I just whistle, shake my head, and throw my hands up.

Nurse Susan fidgets about with the tubes, adjusts the controls one more time, and tells me to be still, quit talking, and stop distracting her. I look longingly at the draft beer the bartender has running from the tap into a tall, iced glass, and ask her, pointing, "Can I have just one of those?"

"Not a chance," she says sternly.

"You don't dare!" an even more stern, uninvited, John Calvin shouts. Already introduced into this story, he's now trying to take over, looking down his nose at me from his perch in the heavens, his finger wagging in admonition.

I shake my head and engage my mouth before thinking. "*Mea Culpa. Ad astra per alia porci*," I retort.

"Careful, sir. I speak Latin," Calvin warns.

"Then try this, '*Enschuldig meir! Gai kaken oifen yam!*'" I spew forth.

"Why would you think that I am unfamiliar with Yiddish?" he asks, incredulously. "I know when I'm no longer wanted," he says in a huff and vanishes.

I should have known better. You've got to get up early in the morning to get ahead of Calvin. He is not easily dismissed, and unless you want to succumb to him, sooner or later he must be dealt with harshly. "Besides," I think to myself, nearly out loud, "he should have KNOWN what the outcome of our conversation was bound to be." I ponder that a moment until I realize I am, again, lured into trying to rationalize Calvin's theology. That rascal can really sneak up on you; his claws once set, dig deeper and deeper, pushing one into the dark realm of resignation.

Days two, three, and four in Houston will apparently consist of infusions of the F & C (fludarabine and cyclophosphamide). The plan then is to head back home on Friday.

Let me think about this. If I plan and work things out to where the plan becomes reality, does that mean that the plan was foreordained to become reality? What if the plan changes? Does

that mean that the plan was foreordained to failure? What about my choices? Did I really choose them?

There he is again, never very far away, never permanently dismissed. I despise the very thought of it, yet can't quite let it go.

"You thought you got rid of me, didn't you?" Calvin asks, not sternly, but softly.

"I knew better!" I said with a sigh. "Will you be in Houston, too?"

"You can't get away from me!" he said melodiously, almost playfully.

"That is an understatement."

8/9/09 A Fine Dinner

Debbie and I just enjoyed dining at the restaurant at the hotel at the Big-as-Texas Cancer Center. Debbie had the top round roast, medium rare, with the creamy horseradish sauce. She said it was delightful. I wanted some, but didn't manage to get any. I placed my order, but right away, the perky, if not Jamaican then certainly Tobago-an maître d', came over and said, "Our special for the evening has been prepared especially for your dinner tonight, Mr. Sharp."

"Really?" I inquire, surprised.

"It is blackened Fludarabine, garnished with a thick, rich Rituximab sauce, and topped with hand-whipped Cyclophosphamide."

I sighed and asked, "Is this good stuff? I mean, does it satisfy? Will it stay down? Will it give me heartburn?"

"Our chef hand-selects all the ingredients and personally prepares them daily in accordance with his own strict culinary standards," she said.

"But does it TASTE good?"

"Well," she said, "it certainly is good for you!"

"And it certainly is expensive, too!" I said in retort. "Any chance of avoiding that and going with the roast beef?"

She wagged her finger in my face, shaking her head.

"All rIght, then!" I sighed. "Bring it on."

"Coming right up!"

8/10/09 Nebuchadnezzar, a Mere Beggar

Up at 3:00 AM in a hotel room (though a nice one!) in a strange city, in a strange place, waiting for my first round of FCR. Yesterday was a long day, and it was followed by a long night, which will be followed by a long day, hopefully followed by a shorter night, not an even longer one.

When one is at Big-as-Texas Cancer Center (BATCC), one sees people who are REALLY ill. Bald-headed, mask-wearing people. People who are obviously suffering the terrible effects of cancer as it ravages their body, who are undergoing huge infusions of toxic drugs which hopefully are quicker at killing the cancer than they are at killing the patient. These people are everywhere. They are in the halls. They are in the restaurant. They are in the gift shop. They fill parking lots and elevators. They are all as ill as a human being can be and still be ambulatory. I suppose the non-ambulatory ones are not seen, being even sicker. They are waging desperate life-and-death battles. They are in the direst of circumstances.

Yet, everyone you encounter speaks. They greet you at every turn. They ask you how you are doing. They smile, or they are masked and you can see the smile reported in the sparkle of their eyes. There is still kindness in the voice of the most weary of them. There is hope here. There is life here. BATCC's cup overruns with life. Life crowds out the mundane! Life crowds out the routine. Every moment is alive!

The life I see manifested in people in this place is life that has been tempered through the personal wisdom of those participants who have seen its preciousness reinterpreted by a keen understanding of the nature of time. We all have so little time. I am not those people, though. They are really sick. I am different. I am strong. I have lots of time.

I am here, obviously, because there must have been some mistake made by some clerk somewhere. This will all be straightened out, perhaps today, but if not, then very soon anyway. This mistake is no doubt as simple as a double-scanned item in the Wal-Mart express lane, just rescind one of the transactions and it'll be straightened right out. I can go home. I don't need expensive chemotherapy. Just a couple of aspirins. Just a little rest. BATCC will know just what to do, unlike the clinic in my unsophisticated little home town. I do not belong here!

I rode on the elevator with a masked, bald-headed, ashen woman holding onto a walker-cart that itself held an oxygen bottle and a drip machine, tubes running from her walker/cart to various places underneath her garments and to her nose, laboring to stand aright, and apparently struggling for every breath. She seemed to be from a different world, and from the look in her eyes, she was visiting that other world when, suddenly, recognition came into her eyes. Though a stranger, she was recognizing another human being. In an instant, the foggy eyes focused and, once sparkless, came alive with light. She spoke a greeting. I nodded and spoke in return. For some reason, I felt ashamed. Was I ashamed that I was doing better than she? Was I ashamed that I merely THOUGHT I was doing better than she was. Was I ashamed at the fact that I was glad I was not her? Was I ashamed that, to me, there seems to be more life in me than there is in her? Somewhere in all those questions lies the answer, for the sense of shame is certainly there. I thought for a minute that she seemed to be thinking what a shame it was for me to be ashamed. She probably was. Then, still there, she went back to

wherever she was before we met eyes. As precious as her time must be, she shared some of her finite remaining amount with me. How selfless! How humbling! How uplifting!

Further exploration is required. She has a finite amount of time remaining on this earth. I, on the other hand, have, er, uh, . . . hmmmmm . . . let's see . . . er, well I suppose, uh,uh, as it were, uh, one might . . . ah . . . say I have a finite amount of time remaining, too. What about you? Hmmmmmm! Time for you . . . ah! Well, finite seems to apply to you, too. So how do we differ as human beings, that masked walker/cart lady and I?

As I look around at all these really sick people, I am poignantly reminded that I am those sick people. All of us are all those sick people. We meet ourselves coming and going, and I find myself greeting myself at every turn. I must remember to say hello to me when I see me, and smile, and share an instant of my finite remaining time in the simple, but eternally important, acknowledgement of another human being. There is someone in there. They deserve to be acknowledged as themselves. When we acknowledge others, we are acknowledging ourselves and the common humanity we all share.

Now, for my second cup of coffee, sweetened with just a touch of cyclophosphamide, the perfect way to start the day!

At this very moment, I feel like I could whip the entire world. There is breath in my lungs. There is strength in my arms. There is hope in me! Nebuchadnezzar, overlooking Babylon and all that was his could never have felt like I feel right now! Napoleon, snatching the crown from the hands of the Pope and placing it on his own head must have only felt a fraction of how I feel at this moment. I can only hope that all people can start their Monday morning just like this: wet, saturated and dripping with the unexplainable, wonderful, and powerful surrounding aura of joy.

Remarkable!

Oops! I see myself coming down the hall, hobbled by time and circumstance. Gotta go and say hello to me!

8/10/09 Round 1, Part 1, and Calvin said . . .

***So many stories
On masked faces valiant eyes
Peer back like mirrors***

My friend Paul Birch got me stuck on writing Haiku. If you have spent anytime reading this blog, then you already surmised that I have PLENTY of words. It is far easier to write pages



and pages than it is to reduce what you want to say to a format consisting of one line of five syllables, one line of seven syllables, and a final line of five syllables. We are talking about syllables here, not words. This is a real challenge for me. Sometimes I think about them for hours before I get them to say what I want. Other times, they drop out of the heavens like a gift from a pigeon; sometimes they are about as useful.

The one above is powerful, though, and if you'd've been seeing what I have since yesterday, you'd think so, too. There are tremendous human stories here, and they are longing to be shared. I thought as much, but the minute I decided to investigate, I learned the truth. People who are fighting cancer will talk about themselves if you will simply go over, say hello, and ask them if you can ask them a question. Invariably they say yes if they think you are a cancer patient, too, or if you are the loved one accompanying a cancer patient.

SO MANY STORIES



Here's two.

Walking to the back of the restaurant to be seated yesterday evening, I saw a man sitting alone at a table wearing an "Ole Miss" hat. Of course, I sashayed right over and said, "Hotty Toddy," and say it rather loudly. Heads turned all over the restaurant, as the Rebels are not unknown in Texas after garnering some respect in there by winning the Cotton Bowl last year. Of course, Ole Miss didn't play the Longhorns or the Aggies, but another team from the Lone Star State, which simultaneously gave Longhorn and Aggie fans some breathing room to make them feel better about themselves, their team, and Ole Miss.

I introduced myself to David from Tupelo. We chatted about Ole Miss for a minute, then Debbie appeared and I excused myself and went back to our the table. The voice in my head

told me that he wanted to talk some more, but I ignored it, thinking I would get a chance later. I missed that chance, as sometime while I was eating, David finished his dinner and departed. I repented that I was not obedient to the voice that told me to ask him about himself.

While dining, the couple that Debbie and I were seated next to laughed at some clever remark Debbie made about someone not understanding the way she talked, and that started a conversation with them. Mr. and Mrs. Grace are a lovely couple from Southwestern Georgia, somewhere above Florida, but below Albany. Grace is not their real name, but it is the name I have given them, since it best describes the lady with whom we were pleased to have had a conversation. Grace for her because of her beauty, character and charm, and grace for him, because he was no doubt the beneficiary of her grace for many, many years.

They seemed to be as old as my parents. They talked about hunting trips to Wyoming for elk, where she accompanied Mr. Grace and their sons—she being the camp master, not hunting, but presiding over the camp, doubtless in the same manner in which she presides over their South Georgia home. While we did not talk about our illnesses, she was alert, joyful, and playful in conversation. He, though polite, was distant and distracted.



"He must be the patient," I said to myself.

We talked of the "real" Georgia versus Atlanta.

Grace said, "I meet so many people who say that they have been to Georgia, and when I ask them 'where?' they say 'Atlanta.'" She rolled her eyes. "Atlanta is about as connected to the rest of Georgia as New York City is to the rest of New York State." I knew exactly what she was talking about, having made the same mistake with BOTH places earlier in my life. I learned later that making a connecting flight at Hartsfield International Airport and having been to Georgia are not quite the same thing.

We talked about our various travels: how Yankees make fun of Southerner's speech, and how difficult it is to understand each other sometimes, even though we all speak the same language. We even explored a similar thought we had of how it was difficult to understand people from North Alabama, and how South Georgia, South Alabama, and South Mississippi all had people similar in speech and custom. We enjoyed our similarities and laughed at ourselves.

Mrs. Grace is a gracious Southern belle, charming, witty and pretty: charming without being coy, witty without being catty, pretty without presumption. I suspect that coy and catty are two things that she is very familiar with, though. Etiquette demands that any genteel Southern belle not address certain things directly, but, rather, with discretion and great subtlety. Delivered correctly, an insult from a lady of this caliber would only be noticed long after one was away from her presence. This is as it should be. Of course I am speculating, but I suppose I am not far from the truth. I might add that if one were between this gracious, charming lady and her husband and sons in some manner that she perceived as harmful to them, her charm

would fail her and subtlety would yield to intensity. This, also, is as it should be. Of course, I could be wrong about her, but I don't think so. She seems to be so much like the women in my own family. My speculations can be fruitless though. I indicated earlier that we did not talk about which one was ill. It is she.

Debbie told me that she saw the Graces the next morning, while I was getting lab work done before I started my chemo. She told Debbie that she had had breast cancer years earlier and had been completely free from the cancer for many, many years. It has returned, vengefully, my wife told me, and has invaded Grace's liver. She had returned to BATCC because of her previous experiences here. She was fearful of the result this time. She, so full of vigor and life. No wonder he seemed distant and distracted, consumed no doubt by worry over this very precious person with whom he has shared so much. I hope we see them again, today, somewhere around this place. I will make it a point, now, to meddle in her business. She will know I am sincere, but I must choose my words carefully when we speak, lest I receive some subtle words back from her that will leave me wondering weeks later exactly what she meant.

The LORD, apparently deciding that I needed another opportunity to be obedient graciously provided me with my second chance that morning as I encountered David from Tupelo in the skyway over the street from the hotel to BATCC's main building. We exchanged greetings, shook hands, and then not wasting any more time, I went straight for the jugular.

"David, are you the person who is ill, or do you have family here?" I asked.

"My sister," he said, seeming relieved to be able to talk to someone about it.

"She has lymphoma and is going to have a bone marrow transplant. I am her donor. I have been here for nearly two weeks, getting prepared for the surgery. She is still in Tupelo and will fly over here this evening. The surgery will be tomorrow morning. It is her last chance."

Bone marrow transplants, to the laymen, may not seem like as big a deal as a heart transplant, or a lung transplant, but it is major business, fraught with danger, itself. Forty percent of the people who have one succumb to complications of the transplant itself. Not the best odds.

David went on, "She has been being treated at the University of Alabama Birmingham Medical Center [a world class facility, itself], and they have done everything they could do for her. They sent her here to BATCC. I did not realize all the things required of the DONOR, much less all of the things required of the PATIENT."

I asked him her name. I wrote it down in my notebook. I prayed for her yesterday and this morning. I prayed for Mr. and Mrs. Grace, too. I wrote down the prayer in my notebook. I read it aloud to my wife and asked her if she would agree with me about this prayer. She agreed.

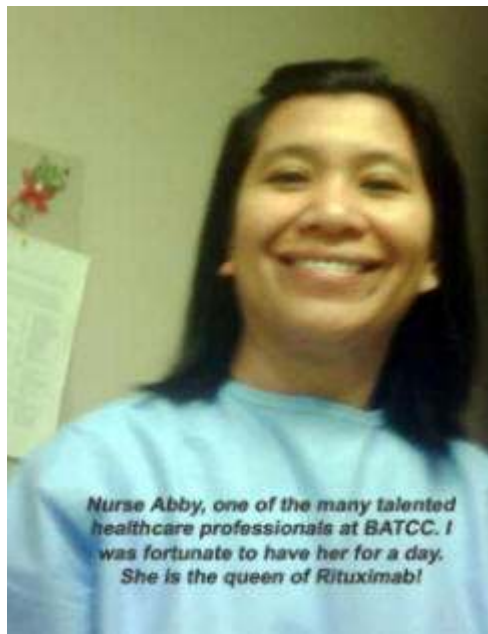
Here it is:

Lord, I intercede on behalf of Mr. and Mrs. Grace. I also intercede on behalf of David and his sister. Bless all the efforts the doctors and staff will make on their behalf. Bless the drugs that they will be given and the hands that give them, speeding them on the way to perform their intended purpose and only their intended purpose. Honor the prayers of their church families, their friends, and their loved ones to whom they are so

precious. Bless every honest prayer from people who are agreeing that they want to see them spared, healed, and completely restored. Give them all Your peace, that peace which passes all understanding. I pray this in faith, believing that You can and will accomplish this, which so many have agreed to, and You will restore them to health so they can serve YOU and others as You send those others into their sphere of influence.

I agreed with Debbie. No doubt, each one of you readers who are persons of faith will agree with this, too. If so, let the Lord know. Just say, out loud, "I agree." If you don't agree, it does not matter. I already had the required quorum when I enlisted Debbie. Your agreement was just going to be for your own edification. Sometimes mystery gives birth to clarity. Isn't it amazing?

ON MASKED FACES VALIANT EYES



Those eyes shine back at you wherever you go: allogenic stem cell transplanted persons, autologous stem cell transplanted persons, persons with compromised immune systems, persons with NO immune systems, persons in dire straits, on the verge of death, fighting for every moment. The all-night-chemo-delivery units host single mothers who come in during the evenings because they can't afford to take off work to receive their treatment. They are sick, sick, sick with cancer and weary beyond all measure, yet they work all day, take chemo treatments at night, and go home to dirty dishes and clothes that need washing, and little bodies that need bathing, and bills that need paying. They are wondering in the quiet moments, when no one is around to hear them wailing, "Why is this all happening to me?" and "When does it end?" Their lives are precious to others, and the others in their life are precious to them. In their quiet, alone moments, they may give in to defeat, but in the halls of BATCC, they stare back with defiant eyes full of life and vigor, with spirits that shine through with strength, because this is a place of HOPE. I hope that we, you, me, all of us, can figure out how to support them in the quiet time, when they are weak and vulnerable, because they are us.

How do we help them? What do we do? Do we come to BATCC and greet them at the door? No, we don't have to go to Texas. We can find them wherever we are. JOB said, to paraphrase, ". . . and the cause I knew not I found out . . ." When an opportunity to help someone failed to present itself, he went out and FOUND one! So can we.

PEERING BACK LIKE MIRRORS

That's scary, isn't it? What does the mirror show us? What do we see when we look in the mirror? What would we want others to do when we found ourselves in dire circumstances? What would Jesus do? I hear laughter in the distant background. This is not just some saying on a silly little wristband. This is not trite. It is not merely an expression. It is as powerful as anything that exists on this earth, and its genuflection and pursuit can yield the most eternal things we will ever do. I don't have to reach out across a world's vast distance to help those in

need. I can find a need within the reach of my arm and GRASP it, and by grasping, DO something.

And then John Calvin, appearing out of nowhere blurts out, "What is today's date!"

A little peeved at being interrupted from my thoughts, I nearly shout, "Gee Whiz, Calvin, give it a rest. I suppose they don't have calendars in heaven! You know full well what the date is. You are a great theologian; you speak Latin and Yiddish; you started a theological discussion that has gone on for nearly 500 years; surely you know how to use a calendar."

"We don't need them here!" he replied.

"Why are you still defending your theology? From your vantage point, are there still some issues you are trying to resolve? You should have that all settled by now. Go away!"

"It's you, my young friend, who is struggling with resolution." He left me speechless and, with that, he knew that he had won this round and vanished to leave me to my own devices, tumbling words in my brain trying to formulate the final answer, and failing.

And my day? My day was lost in a day of observation of others. Lost? Perhaps not the right word. Perhaps exactly the opposite word. My first day of chemo was UNEVENTFUL, personally, except through those observations of others who filled every moment with wonder at the human struggle. "Uneventful" is a word we use in the high-voltage electrical business. Uneventful is how you want every activity to go. Uneventful was how my first round of infusion with Rituximab went. I appreciate that it was uneventful. I am thankful for it.

Those other people are really sick. I was just here for my first round of chemotherapy. I am so fortunate. My cup runneth over!



8/11/09 Round 1, Day 2: Descending into Hegelian Obfuscation



Before I start out with the day's events, let me fill you in on more from yesterday.

I walked over the breezeway from the hotel to BATCC well in advance of the appointed time. My orders said to report to the Leukemia Center on the eighth floor for the research lab blood work at 6:45 AM. I registered there at 6:45 AM. Debbie and I were the only people there. I waited until 7:10 and then walked down the hall to far west side where my instructions said I was to have more blood drawn at the Fast Track lab. I registered there. They told me I was late, that I should have been there at 6:45 AM. I showed the lady the paper, and she said that all the blood was drawn at their lab. I wondered how I was supposed to know that.

I had a seat and waited a few minutes. Now, I hardly answer to my first name of John, but I really can't think of any reason why I should answer when they call for Mrs. Sharp. She called once, twice, then again a third time. My Mrs. Sharp had gone down the hall to get some coffee, so she wasn't there. Somehow they had fouled my chart up and listed my sex as Female. When I got up, the lab clerk asked me, "Are you Mrs. Sharp?" I laughed out loud and so did she.

"No," I said, "I am Mr. Sharp, but I think I am the one you are looking for."

Her eyes sparkled and she laughed, "Well, this says that you're a FEMALE."

"I suppose a re-examination would confirm my sexual status."

"Undoubtedly," she said.

"Can you change that?" I inquired.

"They'll have to do that down the hall," she said.



I was going to tell them down the hall, but forgot. Later in the day I knew just what to do. I sent this e-mail to Nurse Susan, my protocol nurse:

Susan:

Change my records to indicate that this world class medical facility understands that I am not a FEMALE.

As I told you, I will hardly answer to "JOHN." I really fail to answer when they call for "Ms." Sharp.

Isn't that funny?

She wrote me back: *I checked the computer before I left yesterday and you are now a male.* This was much simpler for me than for others who wish to make a similar change.

Prior to that, though, I went to see Nurse Alice, Gooday's most excellent nurse practitioner. I first saw Nurse Alice when I was here last January. She is of Asian heritage. Her fiery black eyes flash brilliance and understanding all at once. She has the hands of a healer. Her touch is cool, sure, and comforting. I don't suppose I have ever seen any person who I surmised was as competent as she. English does not seem to be the language she was born to, but she must have come here at a very early age. She listens carefully when you speak, taking in everything you say. Then she seems to translate it in her mind, formulate her answer in her native language, translate that back to English, and upon completion, she begins to speak. Now this all happens at a remarkably precipitous rate, but it SEEMS to be happening nevertheless. When she speaks, her words come out in an unbroken, flowing stream, with no "uhs" or "umms" or any of the vehicles that we use every day to keep the rhythm and timing of our speech going while we are thinking of what we are going to say. Nurse Alice already knows what she is going to say, thus the words flow in a steady stream, unrushed, almost rehearsed. It is an inspiring confidence builder. She breaks out in spontaneous smiles and laughter that is contagious; I smile and laugh trying to keep ahead of her. It is a difficult job, but I think I am up to it.



Nurse Susan, my FCR Protocol Nurse, has been helpful to me at every turn, from getting me registered on the FCR Protocol, to advising the world-class medical professionals that I am not female. She has monitored my progress every step of the way and has even seemed to enjoy reading this blog. I hope she finds something here that makes her want to point other people to it. I appreciate all her efforts on my behalf.

Nurse Abby, Nurse's Assistant Gady, and Nurse's Assistant Marilyn in the Ambulatory Care Bed Unit, where they administer the chemotherapy in a seemingly all night smorgasbord, also have my thanks for their kind attention. Nurse Abby wins the prize as the one who FIRST administered Chemotherapy to me. She gave me my first dose of Rituximab yesterday. She also made my all-day-long experience better by her constant smile and reassurance while checking on me.

The Rituximab had to be given to me very slowly to allow my body time to adjust. My body must have been slower than others because I got a bad case of the itches. They had to shut off the rituximab and give me some IV Benadryl (diphenhydramine) and IV Hydrocortisone and give them time to work before continuing. I started at 11:30AM and I'd not finished until 5:45 PM, after which I had to remain for two more hours of observation since I had had a reaction. Some reactions can be very serious (FATAL is definitely serious); mine were not, though.

Other than not being able to sleep, I had no side effects during the night.

This morning, I went back for lab work at 6:45, then back to floor 2 for more chemo. Today, I would get my first doses of Fludarabine and Cyclophosphamide. Nurse Abby was on duty and came to say hello, but she was working the other hall, and I was not served by her. Nevertheless, I was competently served. The infusion of these drugs did not take nearly so long. I was finished by 11:00 AM, and felt remarkably well, in fact much better than I expected. I had a slight stomach ache in the afternoon and a terrible restlessness and agitation, which passed after Debbie and I went on a walk to the water Gardens just to the West of the Hotel.

We saw Gooday on his way home on our return walk. He was stopped at a traffic light. He rolled down his window, smiled and shouted, "Well, I see you're still alive!"

"And feeling better than I expected," I shouted back.

He just shook his head with a laugh and said, "You Mississippi guys are tough. See you tomorrow!"

We smiled and waved as he sped off with the green light. I recalled my first visit with him. He said then that enjoying the company and companionship of your wife after a hard day's work was one of the things that made life worth living. I'm sure he was very pleased to see me out there with my bride of 30 years, walking hand-in-hand with her down the street in this beautiful part of this magnificently large city, without an apparent care in the whole wide world. It must have made HIS work seem that much more important because he witnessed us doing the exact thing that he said was so important in all our lives.

I later got this e-mail from Nurse Susan: *I did check out your blog this morning and your writing is fabulous. I started reading on the bus and almost missed my stop. You are inspiring in your observations of people. I tried to go see you today, but missed you.*

I also got this e-mail from my friend Bruce: *I have been following the CLL blog for many weeks now. I'm sure it's therapeutic for you, but---and I hope you understand this (I'm pretty sure you will)---it's very entertaining, to me at least. As a former Philosophy major at Berkeley, I find discussions of Calvin, et.al. fascinating especially coming from you who are thinking of such things in a special way, a way inconceivable to the rest of us. None of the above is meant to trivialize what's happening. You know I love you and think only the best thoughts for you.*

One of my goals with this blog is to entertain. I am pleased that someone is being entertained by it. I certainly am entertaining myself. SO that's at least TWO of us.

Earlier, I got this e-mail from Buckshot Steve. It was very encouraging and meant a lot to me: *Please call or e-mail to let me know how the treatment goes. I predict you will tolerate the chemo without any discomfort and the results will be better than expected! Our thoughts and prayers are with you. Peace*

Even earlier, I got e-mails from two fellow CLL Club inductees: one a pretty girl with a young and beautiful family in Minnesota and, the other, a cheerful fellow in California who seems to be a lot like me. Of course, I can't tell you what we exchanged in these e-mails because it consisted of double-secret communications, electronic handshakes, passwords and the like,

which the uninitiated are not permitted to know. But I think they were encouraged by reading here. I know that I am encouraged by writing.

After Debbie and I had supper, we had a nice long visit with David from Tupelo. He had had a hard day getting prepared to deliver bone marrow stem cells to his sister, who is now scheduled to arrive on Saturday. She will be here for several days in preparation for her transplant, after which she will stay in Houston for several months. I admire this brother's love for his sister. He has gladly undergone painful preparations for his sister, who is so precious to him. He wants her to get well. He loves her so much.



We met a kindly man, a Mr. Hargis from way, way, way South Texas. He was here taking care of his wife who has had a cancer return in a most threatening way, but they are apparently early enough in its detection that there is great hope they can fix her right up. We pray that they are able to do so right away, and softly and gently.

Earlier in the day, Debbie saw Mrs. Grace. She said that Mrs. Grace said that they had told her that her cancer was terminal, and that she had about seven months. She was not feeling well at the time, Debbie reported to me, but she was still being charming and witty. Sometimes dark humor helps us find our way to the light, or at least, it keeps us going until the light manifests itself. I later saw Mr. Grace and told him that Mrs. Grace would be in my prayers. He smiled and was as gracious as she, no doubt having been trained by her, as all of us Southern husbands have been trained by our wives. My heart aches for them.

"Lord, I ask You to bless Mrs. Grace's remaining time. Make every moment be real and with purpose. Give her the peace that passes all understanding. Give her Your strength. Give her the constant hands of her loved ones nearby and help every moment they have left to spend together on this earth be filled with Your Harmony and Joy." That is my prayer for Mrs. Grace. For Mr. Grace, too. I have been touched by them in a profound way in just two days. My life will never be the same.

Out of nowhere, I hear that acerbic stern voice of my old nemesis Calvin, "When it's your time, it's your time!"

"Well, is that predestination, or is it chaos?" I ask him.

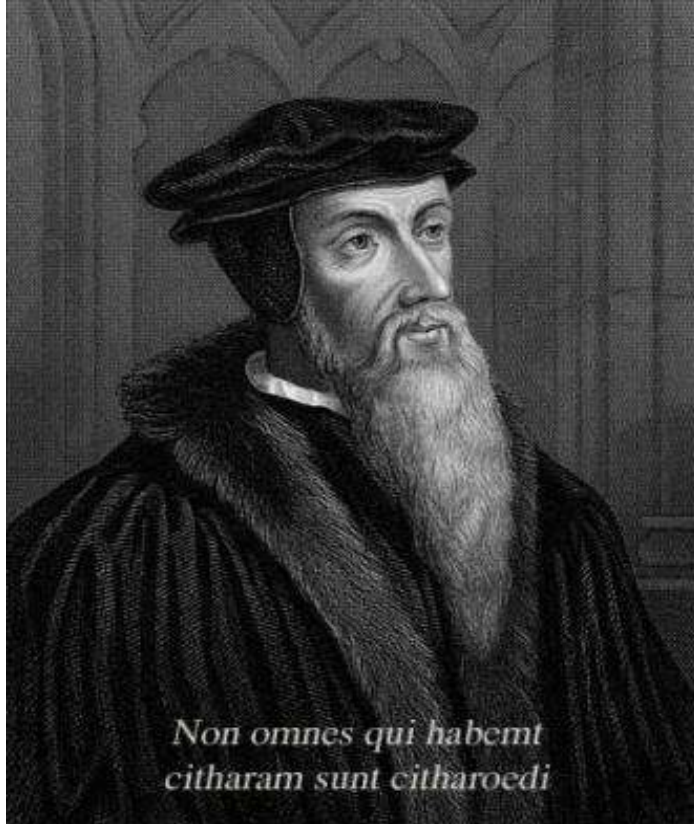
"There is no chaos," Calvin replied smugly.

"If you don't mind, I might need presentation of a more convincing argument before I can accept that. For goodness sake, you introduced that idea to Protestantism. Is that all you have come up with? Nietzsche said it's all chaos."

"Well, he's not saying it any more. He's no longer in a position to be his own advocate."

"Where is he?"

"Well, he's certainly not here!" Calvin said with a raised eyebrow. "Perhaps it was not his destiny."



I surmised, "Perhaps his destiny was sealed by his pugnacious clinging to chaotic behavior. He certainly was unpredictable, or were you able to predict his unpredictability?"

"That never was my job," Calvin said. "You'll have to consult with Hegel."

I did not say another word. I just turned, walked into the bedroom and climbed into bed, weary, and made even more weary by the very thought of Hegel. I went immediately to sleep: a deep, restful, dreamless sleep.

8/12/09 Round 1, Day 3: A Manly Altercation in the Parking Lot

Pelicans gliding

Close to the water's surface

Some fish pause in awe

Day three of chemotherapy went without a hitch. I had labs at 6:45 AM at the Fast-Track Lab on the eighth floor, then off the ATC Bed Unit on the second floor at 7:15. Once I arrived at the ATC Bed Unit, it took all of an hour-and-a-half. They gave me Zofran, an anti-nausea drug; Fludarabine; and Cyclophosphamide. Afterwards, Debbie and I had breakfast, then we called for the car and took off to Galveston. The thought of just sitting in the hotel room all day, again, was just too much.



We sat on the beach for a little while, and just aimlessly drove around, inspecting some of the damage from Hurricane Ike that is still evident, though that didn't hold our interest too long after having inspected Katrina damage at length. Damage from a bad tropical cyclone looks pretty much the same in most every place, whether it is a typhoon, willy-willy, or hurricane. I did enjoy watching the pelicans takeoff and land.

On our return, a small altercation broke out with the valet parking attendants. They said

I had the wrong ticket for a repark. I told them that it was the ticket I had been given just two hours before. They still said it was the wrong ticket. The lead attendant then said for me to write down the number of the ticket, and that would be fine. I had no paper to write it down ON. Rather agitated, I suggested, in a most nonfurtive way that they do whatever was necessary to get me a ticket. They balked, trying to tell me again just to write it down; at which point, I exploded asking them if they expected me to write on the palm of my hand; at which point, they started scrambling to fetch a sheet of paper. My fuse was rather short, I admit.

Here is the real problem: I have been bossed around by doctors, nurses, nurse's assistants, clerks, orderlies, bellmen, waitresses, and, yes, valet parking attendants. It was time to draw the line. Once drawn, I would not move from it, and they dared not cross it. I got my receipt and the profuse apologies of the lead attendant. Everyone here seems trained to be extremely polite to patients and their accompanying caregivers, but it really works like this: as long as you are exactly where they say you are supposed to be at the time they say you are to be there, and as long as you fill out the proper form with the proper pen and put it in the proper basket in the proper manner, you do pretty well. The instant you fail to do that, someone is explaining things to you like you're a first grader. When you argue and point to the written instructions you were given, it is then reinterpreted for you, so that you are surely made to feel that you did not follow your directions. It is done politely, without malice. It is still wearisome.

Yesterday, for an instant, I thought the clerk was going to insist that I was a female. It said I was a female on the piece of official paper that she had, so I must be wrong. The ensuing exchange might well have gone like this:

"Mr. Sharp," the clerk said. "It says here that you are a female."

"Well, ma'am, I can assure you that I am not."

Looking at the piece of paper in her hand, not quite knowing what to believe, she scratches her head and says, "Hmmm! There must be some mistake here."

"Well, ma'am, I'd say that that's a fact!"

"Are you SURE that you are not a female?" she asked, not willing to take my word for it, but placing more confidence in the paper in her hand, though that confidence seemed to be faltering.

"I have been a male all my life," I declared. "I have not been a female for a single instant of it that I can recall. The closest I think I ever came to it was as a contestant in a womanless beauty pageant put on by the local Kiwanis Club as a fundraiser one year. And maybe, if you'd like to write this down, the time that Jimbo Ferris called me a sissy and I knocked two of his teeth right out of his mouth. Would it help if you spoke with my wife? Perhaps my mother? "

"No, sir, that won't be necessary. We can arrange a simple examination to confirm your sexual status. I will give you a form that you will need to take up to the 9th floor, to the Big-as-Texas Cancer Center Sexual Status Confirmation Laboratory. We can get this little issue cleared up right away," she said in her best trained-to-serve-you voice and flashing her best trained-to-serve you smile, with a tiny, tiny sigh revealing that this was all a big bother to her, and why couldn't I simply admit that I was really a female.

"I think I can confirm that for you right now, and by the way, I resent that 'little issue' remark!" I said, no longer amused but getting a little huffy.

"I suppose that won't be necessary," her smile even more condescendingly bigger.

"Well, I certainly appreciate your trust and confidence me," I said, smiling back even larger. I was then directed back to my seat, staring straight ahead, as all the people in the room were whispering and pointing at me, wondering if I knew what I was talking about.

Sometimes the more efficient we are about our business the less aware we are of things immediately around us. This can cause some tremendous problems.

Now that my records have been changed, everyone here is officially satisfied that I am a man. I don't think the two valet parking attendants had to confirm that via official records. I think they were able to determine that I was a man right away.

Caveat: You have to determine where the actual recollection stops and the conjecture begins. They are both here. I am not responsible if you are not paying attention to what you are reading. You've been warned more than once!

Of course, everyone here is actually great. I am just tired of it and ready to go home. I am tired of taking chemotherapy. I am tired of doctors, nurses, scales, needles, toxic medicines, the whole bit. But here's where the rubber meets the road: I've had chemo for three days now. I have had very few minor complications and side effects. I feel far better than I expected to. I am doing remarkably well. In addition, there are really, really sick people all around me: the wonderful Mrs. Grace with the most unfortunate news that her cancer is terminal; the soon-to-be-arriving David-from-Tupelo's sister, who is going to undergo a most treacherous bone-marrow transplant—itself a very hazardous procedure—to avoid a sure fire death from T-cell Lymphoma; the women and men in masks, in wheelchairs, fighting and struggling for each and every breath, striving to LIVE!

What can I complain about? A typographical error on my records that was fixed properly by the first person I asked who had the authority to fix it? A spat with the valet parking attendants, who rushed on winged feet to get what I demanded of them the instant they learned I was serious about that demand, and then apologized profusely for making me wait for fifteen seconds while they got it?

I am not so petty. I am not so callous. I have written about this and all of the angst I felt is now gone. I repent of ever having had it. While my angst is gone, Mrs. Grace is still terminal. David-from-Tupelo's sister still needs that bone marrow transplant, and David, himself, is undergoing painful and dramatic procedures to be able to produce enough stem cells so that his sister's ONLY chance at survival can be implemented. And the hundreds and hundreds of people I have seen coming in and out of this hotel, the chemo infusion unit, and everywhere up and down the halls of this Big-as-Texas Cancer Center are still fighting battles that are perhaps even bigger than Texas.

I am so thankful for this place and the care that I have received. I am so thankful for this afternoon.

"Did you expect things to be any different than they are?" Calvin whispered straight into my head.

"If we thought that nothing could be changed, then I suppose none of us would have come here," my short fuse getting shorter. "Why do anything? Why make any plans? Why wake up in the morning? Why waste time talking to you!"

"Do you really think I am a waste of your time?" he asked.

"I certainly do," I replied.

"Then why do it?" he asked, setting the trap so subtly that, in my tiredness, I never saw it coming.

"I just can't seem to help it!"

I could hear him laughing all the way down the hall. I thought, apparently out loud, that I'd wring his neck if I could get my hands on him.

And the last thing I heard, as his laughter was diminishing down through the distance of the ether was a melodious, "But you can't, can you?"

8/13/09 Reflections From Other Faces

*Time is like money
Withdrawn from dwindling accounts
On what is it spent?*

We had dinner in the hotel restaurant as we had every night.

I cast my eyes about in every direction for David from Tupelo, hoping to get some news of how things went today. There was no sign of him. We hope that the doctors got everything they needed from him and that he was able to go home with the way properly prepared for his sister's arrival.

After we ate, we were just sitting there, when Debbie told me that she had seen Mr. and Mrs. Grace. I wanted to say goodbye to them, as Debbie had told me that they were flying back home to Georgia early Thursday morning. She said that maybe we shouldn't bother them, but I would have none of that. This was my last opportunity to meddle in their business, and I was not going to waste it. I spotted them sitting in the high-backed booth right behind us, not visible until I went over into the other aisle.

They had finished their meal and were waiting for the waitress to bring Mr. Grace some ice cream. I walked straight up to Mrs. Grace and held out my hand, which is not really proper Southern etiquette, since a man must wait for a lady to offer her hand, but I couldn't help myself. She took my hand and asked me if we would take a seat and visit with them for a while. We did, and my how we visited. We laughed, we joked, we talked about peculiar people we both knew back home. We talked about our families; we talked about dog-hunting vs. still hunting, dove hunting, elk hunting, quail hunting. We talked about music, work, pulpwood (and the demise of short wood), the methods employed by garment manufacturers, cattle, fences, hay fields, fire ants, armadillos, coyotes, feral hogs, house dogs, hunting dogs, red-bone hounds, cats, travel and its annoyances, travel and its glories, Georgia Public Radio, Mississippi Public Radio, Ray Price, Eddy Arnold, hurricanes, tornados, marriage, long-time marriages (theirs: 60 years, ours: 30 years), the frequent silliness of husbands, the often foolish behavior of husbands, the dependence of husbands on their wives, the cleverness of wives, and how smart husbands can be when they listen to their wives. And, perhaps, we might have discussed the plague from which all deep Southerners suffer, the SINUS. Though we may not have, not really remembering that, but the SINUS topic was there, if not on the table then just subsurface lurking, trembling with the anticipation it experiences when Southerners get together. We did all of this in a span of a few, short minutes . . . an entire lifetime of conversation compressed into a half-hour.

All four of us, Mr. Grace, Mrs. Grace, Debbie, and I have only a finite amount of time. We all withdrew from our dwindling time capital accounts and spent it wisely, I think; at least, I am satisfied with my purchase.

As we got ready to leave, I told Mrs. Grace that I had best wishes for her and that I hoped things went well. She said this: ***Mr. Grace and I are going to have many more wonderful adventures over the next few months.***

I believe that. There is a fire in her eyes. There is defiance, not resignation.

I said, "I'm certain that if anything ever overtakes you, it will have to do so while you are moving. It will not find you still and unaware." She seemed to like that. Her 81 year old eyes lit up even brighter, no hint of age in them, or weariness, but youth, vigor, and determination, and an illumination that shone out for everyone who would pause to look that cried, "There is SOMEBODY in here."

To the delightful Mr. and Mrs. Grace of Southwest Georgia: *I extend my highest and best regards, respect, and admiration. May the air you breathe on the roads you travel on your adventures be cool and refreshing on your face and in your lungs, and may your paces quicken to see the wonder that surely must be present just around the next bend; and once encountered, may that wonder fill you with an awesome joy that demands you stop a while simply to BE in its presence, together.*

I wish that for the Graces. I really do! It is certainly what I wish for myself. I hope she doesn't forget the zippered bag.

Apparently, the morning after Day 3 of the chemo is when one starts to experience nausea. Off for Chemo round 4 and then to see Gooday, Nurse Alice, Nurse Susan, and then home.

8/15/09 Round 1, Day 4: A Jackass Apologizes: Home Again



We left Texas on Thursday, right after seeing Gooday. He and Nurse Alice indicated that I had responded well to my first round of Chemo. All my numbers were good now, and they should continue to get better with each round of chemo. Hopefully, the last round will destroy enough cancer cells so that there is no detectable cancer in my body, which means that it will be a long time until it returns. While it is possible that ALL the cancer cells will be killed, the numbers say this is unlikely. Nurse Alice and Gooday did not tell me this; I know it from other research. They just indicated that my response to treatment was immediate and dramatic. Nurse Alice indicated that my lymph nodes had significantly decreased in size, and that all the symptoms should be gone in just a few days. Nurse Susan is setting up future

appointments, since I have to return in three months for a bone-marrow biopsy and follow-up, and is getting things ready to send to Hemosapien for my return visit to him on Monday. Shown at left is Nurse Alice. Nurse Susan is on the right.



Having been dismissed, we took off back to the hotel, packed our things, called for a bellman, and called the valet to get him to bring the car up. It is at this point that I must eat a little crow.

The reader will recall that I indicated a near altercation with two of the valet parking attendants on Wednesday when we came back from Galveston. To cut right to the crow eating, I found the ticket the attendant said he had given me in my pocket. He was right and I was wrong. My philosophy, being that the customer is always right, was also supported by the fact that even though I was wrong, they served me in the most accommodating way. The jackass was braying loudly and behaving badly. I have no excuse for my bad behavior. I am guilty. When we got down to the car with the bellman, I was glad the attendant I had bitched at first and most loudly was there. I regretted that the other one was



not there, too. When I approached the valet, I asked him if he recalled my rude behavior the day before.

He said, very courteously in his broken, middle-eastern-accented English, "It is no problem, sir."

"Yes, it is a problem because I behaved very badly, and I apologize for it." A smile went from ear-to-ear, and he said, "It is no problem, sir. We are happy to serve you."

When I inquired about his associate, he said that he was off that day. I asked him to extend my apology to his associate and expressed my regrets that he was not there so I could do so personally. "It is no problem, sir," he said.

Of course, I was not chintzy. I didn't leave him with just an apology; I left a tip, too, which I asked him to share with his not-present-at-the-moment associate.

He said, "It is no problem, sir."

I then asked if I could impose on him to take his photograph with him holding the note I had prepared. At first, he seemed to hesitate. I suddenly thought that perhaps he was a Muslim and did not want me to take his photograph, but then he broke out into a smile and said, "It is no problem, sir."

So, the attached photograph is evidence for all to see that one can eat crow when one has to. In fact, crow tastes better than foot. We should all try a bit of it from time to time. I don't think I will ever like the taste, but it sure is GOOD for me. Sort of like Rutabagas, I suppose, but—without the aftertaste—not nearly so bad, perhaps because crow digests so well! It certainly digests better than the tacos I later ate at the Taco Bell in Hammond, Louisiana.

Debbie and I had an uneventful, but long, trip home. Traffic delays in Beaumont and Baton Rouge due to construction on I-10 were unwelcome, but far more welcome than the accident-with-fatalities that delayed us on our trip to Houston. Lured into a false sense of achievement by the anti-nausea drug, Zofran, which was still in my bloodstream because it had been administered with the chemo, I decided to have Taco Bell's menu 8 crunchy tacos. It was a mistake.

We got home about 10:30 that evening. Debbie had alerted the media that we were returning, but thankfully, the only ones waiting for us were Canaan, Piper, Livi and Maggie. Canaan had had the house to himself all week, with his buddies, and they had made a substantial mess. Being the charmer that he is, he had called his sister to help him out of a jam, and I'm sure, watched TV while she did an immaculate job cleaning the house. I'm also sure he had to listen to some reprimands from his sister while she did this, but he would have considered that merely the price of having the work done; a price he was willing to pay. Consequently, the house was in perfect order when we got home, much to the great pleasure of their mother. And I, not finding anything out of place and after great inquiry and examination of my son—he having left no chore undone---could not think of a single thing to gripe about. I chatted with the younguns for a moment, talked about my first chemo experience, kissed the grandbabies and went to bed, sleeping fretfully as one does when still driving after a long trip.

Violent, vivid and visceral nausea awakened me at 3:00AM. When I used those three words, I was not exaggerating. Those tacos had settled precariously into a chemotherapy infused digestive system that was now, unfortunately, free from the effects of the Zofran! I was not good company. As soon as the pharmacy in Dekalb opened, Debbie called them, got Jim V. on the phone (my pharmacist and friend!) and he filled the prescription as she was on the way to get it. When she got there, she said that EVERYONE in the pharmacy and the grocery store inquired about my status. Unless one is a philanderer, or prone to things which cause one's name to appear in the unflattering sections of the weekly newspaper, It is wonderful to live in a small community. Zofran is remarkable stuff! I am thankful for it, thankful that it did not give me a headache (which would have precluded its use), thankful for the prescription for it, thankful for the pharmacist that filled it, thankful for the wife who rushed to pick it up, and thankful for the community which embraces me, the pharmacy, and all of its employees.

I ate nervously the rest of the day. I am still nervous about eating today. In fact, I have not yet taken my Zofran this morning (6:43 AM). Excuse me, but I must go now!

(7:20 AM) It's off to see Hemosapien Monday morning! Until then, for sure, Zofran will be my constant companion, along with my Allopurinol (for my kidneys as they filter out all the dead lymphocytes) and my Acyclovir (to help stop outbreaks of the chicken-pox virus that can manifest itself as shingles, able to run rampant due to a chemotherapy induced immune system suppression). Excuse me if I don't shake hands!

Before I go I must acknowledge the Thaxton United Methodist Church and the DeKalb Baptist Church for their cards and letters, which everyone within their reach signed. This is uplifting to me and I am grateful for it. I have been borne on prayer through all of this by my family, my church family, my friends, my extended church family (you know, the one Jesus recognizes as HIS!), and acquaintances who have become friends. I have been carried aloft on a surge of its power, and I am not willing to come out from under the umbrella that has been spread for me. Thank you all, again!

8/17/09 The Physician, The Archer

I had an appointment with Hemosapien at 9:30 this morning for him to follow up after my having had my first round of chemotherapy at BATCC at the hands of Gooday and his staff. For all my friends at BATCC, please be advised that the in-house lab at my oncology clinic in Meridian, Mississippi, is able to do the CBC *WITH* differentials. It turns out that we are not as unsophisticated in the provinces as one might think. There are several tests which do not have to be sent out to different labs. I am glad they are able to do this since Hemosapien can have pertinent information for his immediate use.

My blood counts are all good. My white cell counts are far below what they were a week ago. The levels that indicate kidney problems and other complications are currently in the normal ranges. I am feeling good, and I am thankful for the Zofran. Hemosapien wants me to take the Bactrim (an antibiotic) he prescribed as a prophylaxis. They told me in Houston that they do not prescribe prophylactic antibiotics, but recognize that some doctors do, and to follow the instructions of Hemosapien on this one on my return home; so, tomorrow, I start the Bactrim. Hemosapien said to stop taking the Allopurinol until I start my next round of chemotherapy. It has done its job for the time being. I am to keep taking the Acyclovir, though.

Looking over the papers that were sent by BATCC to Hemosapien, there is a lot for his office to do to help me comply with the FCR Protocol. I appreciate them doing all this extra work. Nurse Susan at BATCC sent in a large package of paperwork, blood sample tubes, pre-addressed Fed-ex slips and instructions. It is a lot of work for everyone.

Earlier, I said that I appreciated my physicians and staff taking the time to do all these extra things for me. My physician friend Frank-in-Memphis left me a voice mail message that said, to paraphrase, "They do this because it is their job. Every one of your physicians would study, participate, consult, or do anything else within their power because they want to provide you with the best health care possible." Ol' Frank's voice-mail was sort of an admonishment, but the most kindly, friendly sort of admonishment. He is a friend; he is allowed to admonish me in the way that he thinks is for my own good, when he thinks I need it. He certainly is allowed to speak his mind. I will listen. I appreciate Frank-in-Memphis, Gooday, and Hemosapien. They are all so important to me.

Hemosapien thought that it was funny enough to remark that BATCC had included instructions on how to do a blood transfusion in their instructional packet to him. I defended BATCC on this one. I asked him, "Hemosapien, don't you think it natural that the number-one cancer center in the entire world might think that they had best explain everything to those of us out here in the provinces, thinking that we just may not understand?"

"I suppose so," he said, but still sort of hurt. After defending them, I was sort of huffy about it, too. After all, this was some Longhorn folks being a little patronizing to a pair of Ole Miss Rebels. Well, Hotty Toddy, boys!!!! Harrummmph!!!! All in good fun, my Texas friends.

After reviewing all my records and going over them in great detail with me, Hemosapien and I got down to some serious conversation.

"I am going on a bow hunting trip!" he declared with great satisfaction. "Anyone can shoot an Elk with a rifle!"

"Anyone can *MISS* one with a rifle, too!" I retorted.

It seems that Hemosapien is adamant about the higher calling of the archer, and my wish for his hunt was amiss. I regret that. I have the highest respect for the skills of a bow hunter. I'd rather take a deer at 600 yards. Perhaps this is because my hunting skills preclude me getting much closer than that. Bow hunters have to have great patience, and they have to be very quiet, both skills which I am somewhat short on.

I giggled him a bit. "I suppose in your quest for the pure hunt," I poked and prodded, hunting for the sore spot, "you shoot a recurve bow, or perhaps a long bow."

"No, I use a compound bow," he said.

"Ah! The conversations you can have with other bow hunters on that issue are endless. I've noticed that as passionate as bow hunters are about their sport, there is serious disagreement between them on the purity of it, similar to discussions which revolve around traditional music, something of which I know a lot, or folks that take old cars and convert them to street rods vs. folks that just restore old cars."

"Everyone's got their place! There's no really right answer," he said.

"I suppose the real purists would have you making your obsidian arrowheads and fletching your homemade fire-hardened hickory arrows with buzzard feathers."

"And string my bow with sinew that I chewed into shape, twisted, and dried myself."

"They say buzzard guts make the best bow-string sinew," I replied.

My reply was barely out of my mouth when he said, "Tastes too bad!"

Our loud guffaws apparently could be heard all over the clinic because Nurse J came in and delivered a slight reprimand. Being thus reprimanded, we returned to the serious business at hand.

It seems that everyone's got a place for their reasonable practices and ideas. Some gun hunt. Some bow hunt. Some bow hunters use modern compound bows made of modern materials, Some use recurve bows or long bows made from tried and true ancient methods. Some use carbon fiber composite material arrows. Others use arrows of a more archaic technology. Some still use obsidian arrowheads, I suppose. Some use modern razor sharp broad heads that only open up on impact. This one claw hammers an old fretless open-back banjo. This other one plugs his into an amplifier. One takes a 1936 Packard and restores it to its original glory. Another takes a similar Packard and puts in late model running gear and AIR-CONDITIONING! This doctor practices one way. Another doctor practices another. BATCC says no antibiotic prophylaxis. Meridian, Mississippi, says yes. One doctor looks at this, another looks at that. The results: remarkably similar, though the road may vary a bit. The arrow is sent to its destination. The car is driven with pleasure. The banjo played with passion. The Elk

is dead. The cancer is on the run and being pursued. The banjo player pursues his fleeing former listeners.

By the way, archery is extremely important in the history and development of mankind and civilization. No serious or amateur anthropologist should be without some information about it. If you would like to know more, I have a Wikipedia link here. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archery> It certainly is a good STARTING place.

Hemosapien will be on his bow hunting trip when I start my next round of chemo. I will see him before then, though, on August 28.

What's all that got to do with Leukemia?

You should know better than to ask that by now!

8/20/09 One Medicine Less

Fortunately, I have never had to take much medicine. This seems to be changing, however. As I look in my travel bag, I see more and more—evidence that the fifties has led to this. I have heard stories of people who took so many different medicines, prescribed by different doctors, that they had to have a small valise just to hold them all. Their daily schedules had become focused on taking different medicines at different times. I have also heard that when their health continued to deteriorate, family members intervened. All the medicines were then collected and shown to a different physician, and many of those medicines were eliminated, or changed to others less incompatible with medicines that must be taken. The results of those stories were that, after weeding out several medicines in favor of only those which **MUST** be taken (like high blood pressure medication or blood thinners), the overall health and vitality of the patient improved dramatically. This is an interesting concept—anecdotal, but having enough powerful testimonies to dispel easy dismissal.

Having said that, starting yesterday, there is one less medication I am required to take, at least temporarily. I do not need the anti-nausea medicine ZOFTRAN anymore. I did not take it yesterday, though I carried it with me, not wanting to have it unavailable if it were suddenly (and suddenly is the right word) needed. After two days, my nausea appears to have subsided. That leaves me thankful for several things:

1. That ZOFTRAN works and is available to me.
2. That I do not have to take it for the next couple of weeks.
3. That my nausea has subsided.
4. That the list of medicines I am taking is shorter than it was.

There is so much to be thankful for! Overall, the side effects of the FCR chemotherapy have been almost miniscule. There are still things that can go wrong, but all my numbers look good, and the chemo seems to be working according to its intended purpose.

I did hear from David-in-Tupelo via e-mail. Big-as-Texas got everything they needed from him in the way of stem cells, and he was able to go home on Thursday, August 13. His sister arrived in Texas on Saturday, 8/15, and started two weeks of chemotherapy the following Tuesday in advance of her bone marrow transplant. While I may not have all the facts straight, it seems that her chemo will remove as much of the cancer as possible from her system, while simultaneously destroying as much as it can of her own immune system. When she gets the transplant, she will grow a new immune system, basically a clone of her brother's. She will be in Houston for several months. There are many pitfalls a stem cell transplant patient can encounter, and any pitfall is a major danger. We wish the best for her as she goes through this incredibly significant event in her life.

I received an e-mail notice forwarded from the **White House Office of Name Collection for Better Health Care**. It said the following:

Mr. Sharp:

It has been reported to the **White House** that you made “fishy” comments about the **President’s** health-care reform agenda. Consequently, you became the subject of an undercover federal investigation. The investigation, having been conducted under the auspices of the **Department of Justice’s (DOJ) Fishy American Rehabilitation, Training, and Education (FARTED) Commission**, has been completed, and you, having been found to be much too conservative for un-rehabilitated continued participation in modern, liberal society, are hereby ordered by *FARTED* to undergo a surgical procedure, called a **Lousy Obstreperous Behaviorotomy (LOBOTOMY)**.

You can report anytime within the next 30 days to the nearest participating physician or health-care provider of your choice to undergo this procedure. Unfortunately, the government, in an effort to help you get this new and much needed procedure, has determined that the only participating health-care provider is the **Department of Health and Human Services’ National Institute of Mental Health’s** main hospital, in beautiful suburban Washington, D.C.

This will be done at no cost to you, courtesy of the newly created **Governmental Outreach to Citizens Healthcare Administration (GOTCHA)**. So that you won’t have a thing to worry about, free secure transportation and escorts will be provided. You will not need any personal belongings, just be ready to go when the *GOTCHA* wagon arrives at your door to pick you up, sometime between midnight and 3:00AM on an as-yet-undisclosed date in the very near future. You should be prepared to stay for an undetermined, extended period of recuperation and rehabilitation.

Sincerely,

Vladimira Kutskinoffya,
Czarina

White House Office of Name Collection for Better
Health-care,
FARTED Liaison Office
Double Secret Under Under Junior Assistant Deputy
Sub-Secretary
Department of Health and Human Services
National Institute of Mental Health
Governmental Outreach to Citizens Healthcare
Administration

Free GOTCHA provided FARTED ordered
Lobotomies for everyone! No waiting!

I must be feeling good to have come up with
that!

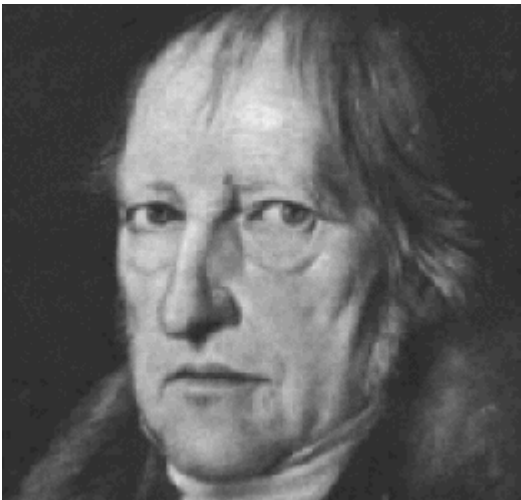


8/18/09 For You Readers

I have gotten a couple of e-mails from people who have just started reading the blog. I am thankful for readers. As a musician, I know how important an audience is. I certainly appreciate one. The last couple of e-mails have pointed out how awkward reading the blog can be since it starts with the latest and reads down to earlier and earlier posts. Sometimes later posts refer to earlier posts, and the reader is left high and dry, sort of like the fisherman in the lagoon who finds himself stranded, absorbed in his fishing and failing to notice the tide has gone out. I have put things in the correct chronological order in a PDF file which you can download [HERE](#). Just right-click on the link and save it to your computer. You can then read it at your leisure. I did not realize that this has grown to over 60 pages. Time flies when you're having fun.

On to other things, some of them indelicate, but so far I have been comprehensive in my blog, revealing my innermost conversations with myself, so it would be imprudent to fail to indicate that constipation is certainly a side effect of the chemotherapy. Today has brought some relief for which I am TRULY thankful. At this point, I am not taking the Zofran any more, so the nausea has subsided. I did have pretty restless sleep with the night sweats last night, but they said this would continue to improve, and finally they would be gone. I thought they had already gone, but last night indicated that I was perhaps a bit premature on this. I did have much more energy yesterday but still ran out of steam about 8:00 PM, thought that was an improvement.

I have been most fortunate.



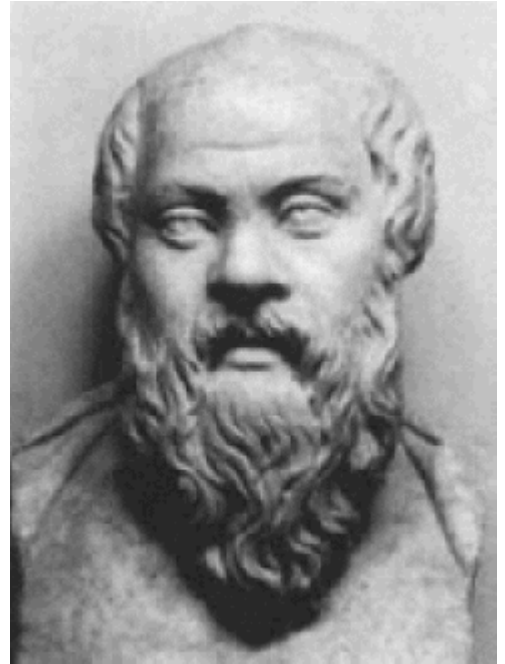
Below is simply a diversion for those of you who are so inclined to be diverted. Lots to think about here. You decide!

Spirit is the "nature" of individuals, their immediate substance, and its movement and necessity; it is as much the personal consciousness in their existence as it is their pure consciousness, their life, their actuality.

Georg W. F. Hegel

Man is the measure of all things: of things which are, that they are, and of things which are not, that they are not

Protagoras



Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Paul, the Apostle

I would never die for my beliefs because I might be wrong

Bertrand Russell





For there is no one so great or mighty that he can avoid the misery that will rise up against him when he resists and strives against God.

John Calvin

8/24/09 Dangerously Pondering Imponderables

I got a handwritten note from Gooday. Among other things, it said, "I suppose I must help you keep this blog going. Always a challenge." I appreciate that.

I got more than one phone call from folks at BATCC checking up on my progress, and one that additionally indicated a couple of errors of a technical nature in some of my descriptions of things, which I am pleased to find out about and edit. I appreciate that, too. I like it that it does not seem that the check-up calls were scripted post-care calls, but were person-to-person among people who know each other, motivated by concern for my progress and well-being. The calls that pointed out descriptive technical errors were also from those who want this blog to be as accurate as possible. I am accurate in my descriptions of how I feel and think about things. (How could I not be? I might be deceptive, perhaps even disingenuous, but never inaccurate.) It is entirely possible that I might be inaccurate in a description of something technical, though, since my description is based on my understanding of things I only partially grasp. I am pleased to have those who read this blog point out how I might change something to make it consistent with medical reality and practice. Thanks to you all!!

I got this e-mail from David-from-Tupelo. He obviously takes after his cousin he tells me about.

Chris:

I am enjoying following your blog. You put a face on a disease that, even though very real, seems abstract to those not affected by it. Your detailed blog is a noble undertaking.

I lost a first cousin to renal cell carcinoma in 2005. (My dad also died of renal cell in 2007.) My cousin was 53, and you remind me of him. He had a thick mustache, thick hair, and wore round wire rim glasses. His parents, my dad's sister and her husband, both grew up in Mississippi. His dad came from an extremely poor family, but he retired as an ad executive in NYC. Even though he was raised in New York, he never forgot his southern roots, and is buried in the beautiful little country cemetery in Calhoun County, Mississippi, where all my dad's family is buried. Not only did he look similar to you, (except he was small frame), but he played the banjo, and was a prolific writer, being quite the wordsmith. He had a law degree in maritime law, and spent several years in Hong Kong practicing law before coming back to New York. I think he would have liked to have been a southern lawyer along the line of an Atticus Finch. If I didn't know better, I could read your blog and almost believe that he wrote it. Anyway, so much for that, but meeting you brought back pleasant memories of him.

BTW, noticed in your bio that your birthday is July 4th, mine is July 3rd. And I did see Texans who knew about Ole Miss, mainly, because Jevan Snead is from Stephenville and played at UTexas his freshman year.

My sister did make it to the "BATCC" on Saturday. They discovered blood clot in her lung on Tuesday. Further tests have revealed that her cancer has come back with a vengeance, and she will now have to have strong chemotherapy until they can get the cancer controlled enough to give her the pre-transplant chemo. They can't start chemo until they can get her in a room. (Can you believe that she has been in emergency

services for two days because there is not a single room available in the hospital?) The doctors told her that if she has the transplant now, the cancer will be back in three months. So, bottom line, her transplant has been delayed two months. My prayer is that they can at least get the cancer knocked down enough to give her the transplant. She has a positive outlook, but is having a hard time dealing with being away from her daughters, ages 16 and 8, for such a long time.

Tell Debbie hello.

Regards,

David-from-Tupelo

Henry David Thoreau: ***Most men lead lives of quiet desperation.***

Does that mean that some are noisily desperate, or not desperate at all? I suppose on reflection Thoreau was right. We are born, we toil, we suffer, and we die. In between, we have moments of sheer joy. It is the lot of mankind. We seek reconciliation by faith with a God we know exists by faith. HE being so real and near to us, though that realm is not measurable or directly observable and, therefore, is rejected by the sciences, which measure and weigh all things they can objectively observe. Being driven by Protagoras' proclamation, our sciences, in which we also have faith, declare that HE does not exist, since HE will not be measured.

Things can get complicated, but throughout this complication, HE is there. He calls. HE beckons. HE seeks reconciliation with us. Wise men long ago wrote down how HE has provided a simple way for us to be reconciled to Him, in exactly the same way that a father would make a sacrifice for his child that he loves so much—perhaps the same way a brother makes sacrifices for a sister he loves so much. We all seek this. We all long for this. And some embrace it, and finding the peace and reconciliation they so desired then go on in the face of the direst of circumstances or simple ordinary daily life, borne along by a grace they never thought possible, leaving the desperation far behind.

Desperate CIRCUMSTANCES do not always require desperation in the people who face them. That is what I hope for David-from-Tupelo's Sister. I would transfer all the desperation to her extended family, circle of friends, and her church family, and that that desperation would manifest itself in this manner: Desperate noisy prayers sent by desperately faithful people, faithfully and desperately expecting miraculous answers to desperate situations, and bearing other's desperation, and the desperation of the beneficiaries, like insurance actuaries hope to spread the pain of loss across a spectrum of shoulders so that each shoulder has an easily bearable pressure of a mere few pounds per square inch, like a good foundation sunk into good earth supporting a huge building, it standing erect and tall, weathering the worst storms.

I am desperately praying that David-from-Tupelo's Sister receives just the touch from God that she needs, just the one that God wants her to have. I know what I want and I think I know what her family and friends want, which is all the same thing. What does God want? That is a hard answer because what we think God must want is not what seems to be happening before our very eyes. What we all really want, in the long run, is what God wants, but our humanness sometimes forces us to wonder whether someone is asleep up there. Is that blasphemous? It can't be because I am certain that I am not a blasphemer. Is it sacrilegious? No, because I am not sacrilegious! (I am no Bill Mahr!)

What is it then?

It has got to be this. It must be this. Humans, chained by the constraints of time, the portion of which we share on this earth hardly being a measurable bump on its eternal scale, cannot see through the obscurity of this spectrum that the things we endure here have no impact when weighed against the infinite, other than how they prepare us for it.

It is a hard, hard schooling at the hands of a harsh, harsh instructor, or so it seems.

I am reminded of the recent lesson I received based on the lesson that JOB received. It is still too fresh in my memory to ignore. And coming back to mind regularly is the Apostle Paul saying, "Faith is the evidence of things not seen, the substance of things hoped for."

Faith . . . the substance of things hoped for. Faith . . . the substance of things hoped for. Faith . . . the substance of things hoped for.

The things we hope for have SUBSTANCE. That substance is our faith. We must cling to it. We must not abandon it. When we do, we abandon the most precious substance we have. If we dropped a five dollar bill as we were walking down the road, we'd stop and pick it up, never thinking for an instant that we'd just abandon it. That five dollar bill has SUBSTANCE. If, then, faith is the SUBSTANCE of things hoped for, what is its value or, rather, what is the value of the things we hope for? We certainly wouldn't abandon our faith over the price of a Happy Meal. At what price does its abandonment offer profit?

So much to think about. So little to think with. My resources are strained, but not desperately so.

8/29/09 Measures and Benchmarks

People measure things. We get out our rulers, our scales, our other devices, and we measure, we weigh, and we observe. A man wise in so many, many things once said, "Man is the measure of all things: of things which are, that they are, and of things which are not, that they are not."

Someone also once asked, and it has been often re-asked, "If a tree falls in the woods, and no one is around to hear it, does it make any noise?" I have also heard it as, "If a tree falls in the woods, and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?"

Protagoras must have been the first man to pose this question, because it seems to be the very basis of his premise: if no man measured it, it does not exist. Of course, I am speculating on how Protagoras might have answered this question. It is not recorded that his views ever changed. They might have. Perhaps his philosophy morphed into something similar to Bertrand Russell's.

We will assume that no other living entity heard the tree fall, either, and make no basis here for frequencies that can be heard by living entities other than humans. If no one hears the tree fall, then it cannot possibly make any noise, since noise is sound waves harnessed to human-subjective interpretation. Before I learned to like the music of my grandfather's generation (and earlier!), I thought it was noise. He (my grandfather) thought the music of my generation was noise. My son's generation likes a variety of music, but they are drawn to hip-hop, which is noise to me. What is noise to one is music to another. We must have a human to interpret the sound for it to be labeled noise.

Sound? That is a different argument. Sound is pressure waves vibrating in a medium (such as air) through which they can travel at frequencies humans can hear, usually falling, with some exceptions, in the range of 20 hertz through 20,000 hertz. Anything below 20hz is sub-sonic, and anything above 20,000hz is hyper-sonic. We generally can't hear them, though with enough power we can certainly feel sub-sonic waves. If sound is those waves between 20 and 20,000 hertz, then the unobserved falling tree certainly made a sound. If sound must be interpreted by a human to be sound, then the tree silently fell. Unless there was a vacuum surrounding the tree, then it certainly emitted pressure waves of various frequencies, many between 20 and 20,000 hertz, which by definition are called sound.

The argument that if no man measured it, then it does not exist, is ludicrous when it comes to sound pressure waves in air. It is less ludicrous when applied to the word "sound." It is entirely reasonable when applied to the word "noise." Yet it fails to satisfy on any level, since the tree did fall and trees do not grow in vacuums. The variable is the lack of an observer.

An observer might have a decibel meter and be able to accurately (within the limits of the accuracy of his meter) measure the exact level of sound at a given distance that the tree made when it fell, which the lack of an observer or a measurement will not change.

If, then, something can be measured but is not, does that mean that it does not exist?

Did atoms not exist until they were able to be measured? Did protons, electrons, and neutrons not exist until they were able to be measured? What about quarks? What about sub-sub-sub-atomic particles? One can argue that *for all practical purposes*, these things did not exist until they were measured, but that is a diversion to semantics that serves only to illustrate the imprecise nature of human communications and the dynamics of language.

Protagoras surely meant to challenge us to think about this. Surely he did not mean that things do not exist because a man cannot measure it.

"What does this have to do with CLL," I can hear being asked? Perhaps nothing. But relative to CLL and ME, everything!

When I was first diagnosed with the disease, it was the disease's measurer that was the initial target of my vituperation. That Hemosapien! That wicked, evil Hemosapien! He had the audacity to measure this disease and give its name to me; therefore, since he is within my sight, he must be my enemy. I must have been taking Protagoras literally. A man measured in such a way that it became reality to me. If Hemosapien had not dared to measure, then the disease could not possibly have existed in my body. This egregious thinking must be common to everyone who is diagnosed with a serious disease. I have explored this before, and obviously I am not through with my explorations. I have a significant amount of remorse at having wasted energy feeling that way, and even more to think that I initially was suspicious of those who would help me. I am surprised at myself.

I reject Protagoras' notion, yet it was actively influencing my thinking in a profoundly negative manner.

Having said all that, I'll say this: I go to Hemosapien tomorrow. He will measure, he will weigh, he will observe. What he measures, what he weighs, and what he observes will have existed prior to his measurements, weights and observations. Subsequent to his measurements, weights and observations, we will have more information with which to make plans and preparations for my second round of chemo which starts the Tuesday after Labor Day, or make other preparations to ameliorate any problems which have subsequently cropped up. Without those measurements, weights, and observations, *for all practical purposes*, no problems could possibly exist. One could be near death, having non-measured therefore non-existent problems, *for all practical purposes*.

I utterly reject Protagoras's thinking. His is the paramount of human arrogance, right up there with Nietzsche's subsequent declaration of God's demise. Perhaps Nietzsche took Protagoras too seriously.

God asked Job, "On what are the foundations of the Earth sunk?" Job remained silent. Job was listening. If God asked Protagoras the same thing, it has not been recorded. If it were recorded, perhaps it might have indicated that he remained silent because he wasn't listening. Perhaps he could not hear what he could not measure—that God, communicating in a way that could not be measured as sound, could not be heard when no one was listening. Perhaps His voice was perceived as noise: a noisy, belligerent challenge to Protagoras's reasonable measurements. Perhaps Protagoras, not being able to measure God, dismissed him as non-existent, and being thus dismissed, God ceased to exist *for all practical purposes*.

Rejection of philosophical principles does not mean that they cease to exist. Just like Calvin, when I think I have dealt with him for the last time, Protagoras rears up his ugly ancient head at MY invitation and this in the midst of rejection, in a most immeasurable way. I can't measure him, yet his philosophy still exists—proof, I suppose, of the his philosophical fallibility. But surely he meant for his maxim to be used to challenge his young students from a smug complacency, to provoke them into a life-long internal debate in search for truth. Surely, as an ancient celebrity, he was wiser than believing his own press. Surely he was after the truth. Surely, the truth will one day manifest itself, regardless of our understanding of our measurements.

8/28/09 Hemosapien weighed and measured. My blood counts are all good enough to allow me to go into my second round of chemo at the clinic in Meridian starting September 8. That is good news. Ol' Hemosapien will not be there. He'll be off on his elk-hunting trip. Nurse J called me this morning to inform me that she had rescheduled me for earlier in the day for the first day of the second round of chemo. She did not know that I was getting Rituximab until this morning when she read the orders that Hemosapien had left for her for my chemo. She had originally scheduled me for 9:30 AM, but once she learned that I was getting Rituximab, she decided that I needed to come in earlier since it takes so long to administer it. The earlier the better is my motto, anyway. I'll be there at 8:00 AM to start this second round.

Gene Bush came down from Nashville to visit me this weekend. We had a good time playing on The Sucarnochee Revue. His Brother, C.P., also came over. We had a large time. The dry-rubbed smoked-pork tenderloin I cooked was a big hit. Gene and I played guitars all Saturday afternoon, while C.P. listened and dozed on the couch. Either we bored him to sleep, or he was relaxed to a peaceful state by the music. I prefer the latter rather than the former. Gene and I debated which of the two it might be. We measured and measured. We failed to come up with the definitive answer.

Perhaps we wasted some time debating measurements we could not accurately obtain. We did measure and agree on this: C.P. was sleeping soundly, and we sure were having a good time!

9-22-09 It's Over the Hill to the Poorhouse

The lyrics of the Lester Flatt tune keep playing over and over in my head:

*I'm old I'm helpless and feeble
And the days of my youth have gone by
It's over the hill to the poorhouse
I must wander alone there to die*

The dying part we all must face, sooner or later. It's the POORHOUSE part that is really on my mind after getting my first post chemotherapy statement from the Big-as-Texas Cancer Center. The previously mentioned \$100,000 annual cap on my health insurance is looming ominously on the horizon, just like the silhouette of the poorhouse backlit against the sun when viewed from the East in the evening.

Since no published information was available that I could find on the cost of chemotherapy, I promised to publish everything I could so that it would be available to others.

This is just the first one; there will be many more to come.

Big-as-Texas Cancer Center

"Free Coffee with Chemotherapy"

ACCOUNT DETAIL

Statement Date: September 12, 2009

Account Details shows only those invoices/accounts
with activity this period.

PATIENT NAME
SHARP, JOHN C

MEDICAL RECORD NUMBER

BILLING NUMBER	SERVICE DATE	DESCRIPTION	PENDING INSURANCE	PATIENT BALANCE
Hospital/Clinic Account Detail				
H10503655342	Service Date 08/07/2009			
	CLINIC		422.00	0.00
	DETAIL DRUG		21,386.85	0.00
	IV THERAPY		880.00	0.00
	LABORATORY		3,564.00	0.00
	MED - SUR SUPPLIES		971.30	0.00
	OTHER RX SERVICES		920.00	0.00
	OTHER SERVICES		3,648.00	0.00
	PATHOLOGY LAB		3,875.00	0.00
	PHARMACY		1,550.70	0.00
	Current Account Balance		37,217.85	0.00
	Insurance Payments/Adjustments		0.00	
	Guarantor Payments			0.00
	Hospital New Activity		37,217.85	0.00
Physician Invoice Detail				
P25962777	Service Date 08/13/2009			
	OFFIC/OUTPT E&M ESTAB MOD-HI 25 MIN		213.00	0.00
	Gooday MD, Melbourne			
	Current Invoice Balance		213.00	0.00
P25939510	Service Date 08/13/2009			
	OFFIC/OUTPT E&M ESTAB 5 MIN		57.00	0.00
	Mustafez MD Shazzbatthi			
	Current Invoice Balance		57.00	0.00
P25932094	Service Date 08/12/2009			
	OFFIC/OUTPT E&M ESTAB 5 MIN		57.00	0.00
	Frastomahafrendian MD Krishnamurti			
	Current Invoice Balance		57.00	0.00
P25925558	Service Date 08/11/2009			
	OFFIC/OUTPT E&M ESTAB 5 MIN		57.00	0.00
	Frastomahafrendian MD Krishnamurti			
	Current Invoice Balance		57.00	0.00
P25996591	Service Date 08/10/2009			
	FISH INTERP. PB		126.00	0.00
	ROUTINE INTERP PB		189.00	0.00
	Mustafez MD Shazzbatthi			
	Current Invoice Balance		315.00	0.00
P25934144	Service Date 08/10/2009			
	FLOW CYTOMETRY INTERP 9 TO 15 MARKE		1,033.00	0.00
	Impeccable MD Geneticist			
	Current Invoice Balance		1,033.00	0.00
P25932093	Service Date 08/10/2009			
	OFFIC/OUTPT E&M ESTAB MOD-HI 40 MIN		420.00	0.00
	Gooday MD, Melbourne			
	Current Invoice Balance		420.00	0.00
P25918432	Service Date 08/10/2009			
	OFFIC/OUTPT E&M ESTAB 5 MIN		57.00	0.00
	Mustafez MD Shazzbatthi			

BILLING NUMBER	SERVICE DATE	DESCRIPTION	PENDING INSURANCE	PATIENT BALANCE
		Current Invoice Balance	57.00	0.00
		Insurance Payments/Adjustments	0.00	
		Guarantor Payments		0.00
		Physician New Activity	2,209.00	0.00

I have asked for a detailed statement of charges. I think I see a couple of things that may be a mistake. Also, we will see what the NET charges will be after my insurer takes the PPO discounts.

President Obama wants to fix our health care. I have been adamantly opposed to the "public option." As his health-care proposals have compromised themselves down to a more common denominator, he has indicated that insurance reform is necessary. He would like to have his health-care bill require that insurers cannot exclude people with pre-existing conditions, nor place arbitrary caps or fiscal limits on coverage. I have to admit that I would have been against that, too, except NOW I am seeing things through lenses with a different filter. NOW, I am all for removing arbitrary caps and limits on coverage. I am all for making sure that pre-existing conditions must be covered.

I was fortunate enough to have one of those "union" health-care packages that was egregious enough that Obama thought the benefits should be taxed as personal income. That changed last year when my group initiated an annual cap on coverage, limiting it to \$100,000.00. This seems like plenty as long as you are healthy. It is NOT enough if you find yourself diagnosed with a serious illness.

I'm old I'm helpless and feeble

- Old enough to have developed this disease
- Helpless at the hands of a medical juggernaut which is a champion of obfuscation (well, not COMPLETELY helpless.)
- Too feeble to single-handedly change the way this system works (But not so feeble as I can't make some difference in places within my grasp.)

And the days of my youth have gone by

- Where did the time go? Where are the days when my only worry was getting myself out of bed so I could get to work on time?

And it's over the hill to the poorhouse

- The news article in the local weekly paper would read like this:

LOCAL MAN SENT TO POORHOUSE

Porterville resident Mississippi Chris Sharp was ordered today by Chancery Judge Samuel Solomon to report to the county poorhouse on Stark Road after having all his assets seized to pave the way for a big public auction to satisfy debts he incurred as a result of treatment for Leukemia at the Big-as-Texas Cancer Center in Houston, Texas. Sharp's remaining assets seized by the county include an old banjo, and a couple of guitars, one with a missing B string, and the old mobile home currently serving as his residence. Judge Solomon was quoted as saying, "I don't like it when those big shots from Texas reach all the way over here to touch one of our citizens, but the law is the law. My hands are tied in this situation." Kemper County Poorhouse director Will Ratchet said that Sharp would be allowed the use of the dormitory at the poorhouse, along with the 687 other inmates (poor-ees!) already there.

According to Ratchet, Sharp can expect to be allowed one tepid water shower per week, three daily servings of gruel provided by a local grist mill, and a Sunday dinner consisting of a deluxe gruel/gar-fish stew (fresh, un-littered) and a complimentary Twinkie provided as a courtesy by the Day Old Bread Store located out on the Old Jackson Road.

"It has been hard to find a donor for the Twinkies," said Ratchet, "and we are thankful for the Day Old Bread Store and it's participation in our "Let Them Eat Cake" program."

Inmates at the poorhouse are expected to provide all the maintenance and upkeep of the Poorhouse, as well as provide their own entertainment, in addition to serving the county by mowing grass, picking up trash from roadways, and other services.

"The addition of Sharp to our roster of inmates is quite a coup for the Poorhouse," said Ratchet. "His electrical and entertainment background will prove to be very beneficial to the Poorhouse and its other inmates."

The Poorhouse was established in 1930, during the height of the great depression, to help those who through debt, illness, mismanagement, chemical dependency, or problems associated with cross-linked genetic specialization (this area has a high incidence of this syndrome), cope with seizure of assets. This program has been beneficial over the years.

Others say the program has outlived its usefulness. ACLU attorney Willie B. Rastaman, in a pending civil suit filed against the county has stated in a complaint that the Poorhouse is a holdover from Jim Crow days and is technically a debtor's prison. A phone call to Rastaman indicated that the ACLU phone number was no longer valid and had been changed to unlisted.

Sharp, when asked about the Poorhouse and the pending suit said, "Who is Jim Crow? Did you mean Jim Croce? I was an entertainer, you know, before I got sick. Did they tell you that we get a TWINKIE on Sunday if we do all our chores and don't cause any trouble?"

The Sharp auction will be held next Saturday at the North East corner of the Courthouse Square. It has been noted that the guitar with the missing B string is also in need of a neck reset. All proceeds of the sale, after auction commissions and court costs are deducted, will go to the Big-as-Texas Center in Houston, Texas. It has been anticipated that the sale will raise as much as \$190

after all deductions have been satisfied. The anticipated amount will be applied to Sharp's balance of \$6,375,428.61 at the Big-as-Texas Cancer Center.

Sharp's treatment, while initially effective, has not stopped his disease from progressing. When asked about this, Sharp indicated that he will be on a new treatment program once he is established as an inmate at the Poorhouse. "They tell me the county allows one visit every six months from a nurse practitioner. I will also be allowed one aspirin per day. They say it is a miracle drug."

As we left, Sharp was sitting on the porch singing, a cappella, "I'm old I'm helpless and feeble, and the days of my youth have gone by. It's over the hill to the Poorhouse, I must wander alone there to die . . ."

I must wander alone there to die . . .

SO morose!!!!

And now for something completely different!



If you keep thinking about what you want to do or what you hope will happen, you don't do it, and it won't happen.

Erasmus

A begging parasite who had parts enough to discover the truth and not courage enough to possess it.

Horace Walpole, on Erasmus



The future is determined because God has foreseen it and His foresight cannot be falsified.

Martin Luther, in response to John Calvin.

God foresees the future because He has willed and determined it.

John Calvin, in response to Martin Luther



Two of the greatest minds in all of theological history seem to be, no, not seem to be, but most definitely are at odds here. I am often torn between the subtle semantic differences between those two statements.

Below are a few unrelated statements with which I am completely reconciled, coming from, arguably, one of the most able minds ever produced in the history of mankind.



It seems that nature has given the dog to man for his defense and pleasure; it is of all animals the most faithful; it is the best possible friend of man.

We perceive here with grief that we have said nothing about cats. We will only remark that there are no cats in the heavens as there are goats, crabs, bulls, rams, eagles, lions, fishes, hares, and dogs; but in compensation, the cat has been consecrated, or revered, or adored, as partaking of saintliness, in several towns - and as altogether divine by no small number of women.

It is certain that a man who is well off will not leave his own land to come to yours.

Others say, "The prudent man makes his own destiny." But often the prudent, far from making their own destinies, succumb to it; it is destiny that makes them prudent.

We shall always have passions and prejudices since it is our destiny to be subjected to prejudices and passions; We shall know that it no more depends on us to have much merit and great talent, than to have a good head of hair and beautiful hands, We shall be convinced that we must not be vain about anything; and yet we shall always have vanity.

VOLTAIRE (Francois-Marie Arouet)

So much wonder to read . . . so little time!!!!

Of philosophy I will say nothing, except that when I saw that it had been cultivated for many ages by the most distinguished men, and that yet there is not a single matter within its sphere which is not still in dispute, and nothing, therefore, which is above doubt, I did not presume to anticipate that my success would be any greater in it than that of others; and further, when I considered the number of conflicting opinions touching a single matter that may be upheld by learned men, while there can be but one true, I reckoned as well-nigh false all that was only probable.



Rene Descartes

Descartes was one of the great thinkers of all time, yet he realized that he had his hands full with his devotion to philosophy. No wonder r-e-a-s-o-n was what guided him. Physicists, chemists, and engineers have seldom, if ever, differed 180°. Psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, theologians, philosophers, economists, and other social scientists disagree by 180° all the time. If the experts disagree by 180°, is not any opinion between 0° and 180° just as valid? Why does one need an advanced degree from a major university and tens of thousands of dollars of student loans to pay off over the course of a meagerly compensated lifetime for the right to say they're an expert in a field in which ANY offered opinion cannot be discounted? I suppose one studies these fields because one simply MUST! No doubt opinions differ by reason of p-e-r-s-p-e-c-t-i-v-e! In this day of relativism, Descartes would be laughed off as old-fashioned. He believed there was an absolute truth. Hooray for him. Though he hardly needs one, having left a body of work that is still studied, I will be his champion. When he is studied, he leaves his permanent mark on young minds, though this mark was unintended by those who insisted he be studied for his incompatibility with an enlightened, modern society; having been read, Descartes is full of himself at the damage he has done. Better for the teachers of modern philosophy if he were ignored by them altogether.

I started my second round of chemo at Hemopsapien's office in Meridian on September 8, the day after Labor Day. He was out of town on his elk hunt, and Nurse J was also out of town. I was left in as good of hands as remained. I was amazed at how many patients that were there that day. There were absolutely no chairs for any persons accompanying patients, only room for patients. They even had to ask a couple of people to get up for patients to be served.

P-E-R-S-P-E-C-T-I-V-E is relative. Perspective is certainly relevant to how you view a particular situation. Our training, our prejudices, our background, our prior experiences all influence our perspective. Our perspective governs how we P-E-R-C-E-I-V-E things, and how we perceive things becomes a reality for us—not exclusive of the absolute truth, but certainly a reality of our human experience.

Here is what I perceived on my first day of FCR chemotherapy at Hemosapien's office.

1. Too many patients scheduled on the same day.
2. Not enough facilities for the patients that were scheduled.

3. No chairs for accompanying relatives or other caregivers.
4. Couldn't beg, borrow or steal a cup of coffee.
5. No privacy of any kind available to patients.
6. Each patient was seen by any nurse, checked by any nurse, and released by any nurse when the treatment was over.
7. I was there all day and was not instructed to bring any food or beverage with me.
8. There is a big difference between treatment at Big-as-Texas Cancer Center and Hemosapien's office, between a world-class public institution and small-town private practice.
9. There was no water in the cooler in the reception area.
10. There was not enough room in the aisles so that your feet were not in the way when you reclined in the chairs.

In fairness to Hemosapien's office, I was comparing out-patient chemotherapy in a private practice in Meridian, Mississippi, with the number-one cancer center on the entire planet. Was that a fair comparison? No, not by a long shot.

Why then did I expect them to be similar, thus guaranteeing my own disappointment? Simple: I had no other experience or basis by which to gauge them. I would have been better served had they given me some instructions as pertaining to my own comfort, but I could have thought of that myself; I do at other times, but not so this time. Was I reasonable to think that Hemosapien and his partners would have a set-up like BATCC? No, it was unreasonable to think so. Now I know what to expect.

I do expect a cup of coffee. If that were my cancer treatment facility, I'd have fresh coffee and a chair for ANYONE who came for treatment or accompanied a patient for treatment. I'd do so without fail. If they need me to get them a couple of chairs (folding lawn chairs would work better than what they had, which was NONE!) and the first week's round of coffee supplies, all they need to do is tell me so.

I suspect that Tuesday, September 8, 2009, may have been a record date for them as far as the number of patients treated. It was as busy as a small-town Sonic drive-in after a Friday night football game . . . as busy as a California fire-fighter beating on a brushfire with a pine-top . . . as busy as four nurses making random rounds can be when administering lots of toxic chemotherapy drugs to seriously ill patients.

Wednesday was uneventful, though I had a long wait in the waiting room. Nurse J, who had returned from being out the day before told me that I should never have to wait over 30 minutes when I was there for chemo. Hmmm! We'll see.

I arrived on Thursday, 9/10/09 at 8:00 AM, which was the time I was told to report back. There was no one in the waiting room. Though no one was there, I had to wait 45 minutes. While there was some confusion during the Tuesday's visit, I chalked that up to what must have been a record number of patients. I still have no answer for the apparent confusion that seemed to permeate the clinic on that Thursday. There seemed to be many unanswered pages repeated. All the nurses were distracted. All the bosses must have been gone. I did get a cup of coffee on Thursday. Maybe that was because all the bosses were gone. I could SMELL the coffee. Thank you, Nurse Juanita, for that cup of coffee.

Am I satisfied? I am now. If you ask me was I satisfied on that Tuesday, every gauge and device I had with which to measure was measuring my dissatisfaction. My gauges were skewed, miscalibrated, being set to a faulty benchmark. My perspective was wrong. I was making an unfair comparison. I was glad that Hemosapien was not there. Had I seen him, I would have perhaps behaved very badly—maybe as bad as that rapper who took the microphone away from the Swift girl at the MTV awards (which I really believe was a publicity stunt anyway!). Maybe not. I hope not. That hectic day-one had me taking all my Rituximab and 1/3 of the Cyclophosphamide and Fludarabine. I had the F and C on Wednesday and Thursday as well. The further into the week I went, the worse I felt.

By the time I had finished on Thursday, I was feeling pretty bad. By the time I got home, I was feeling really bad. I went to bed and stayed there. Friday, I was no better. Here, again, my perspective was skewed. At BATCC they had prescribed this wonderful anti-nausea medication called ZOFRAN. They don't use it nearly as much in Meridian, preferring other drugs, perhaps, because it is so expensive. I remember when I got my prescription filled, that it was a drug for which my insurance said you had to have prior authorization or they would not pay for it. They did not pay for mine since I had no such prior authorization. It cost over \$100. When Debbie called me to tell me that, I was at the point where I would have paid far more, and a hundred bucks would be a bargain if it would do what I needed for it to do, which it did, and I'm certainly glad and would pay it again.

When they gave me the prescription for it at BATCC, I heard them tell me that ZOFRAN was very effective, but became less so as time went on. I HEARD THEM TELL ME SO, but HAVING HEARD THEM . . . I did not HEAR them.

Old optimistic me said to myself, "Well that means that it will become less effective perhaps on round 5 or 6 of the chemo, and then it will probably only be slightly less effective," with me going about my merry way, just a whistling and singing happily.

This is where speculation can have one sailing blindly into treacherous waters.

Nurse Susan might have imagined what I was thinking and warned me, "Now, Chris, you might be getting too far out there. The Zofran can quit working at any time. The next time you take it, it may be **completely** ineffective."

Nurse Alice might have anticipated what Nurse Susan was going to warn me about and further reiterated, "Mr. Sharp, Zofran is a wonderful drug that must be used sparingly. A patient's individual tolerance may vary greatly, and your tolerance for the drug may be reached very soon. *Do not expect it to work every time.*"

Gooday, possibly suspicious about what Nurse Alice and Nurse Susan had failed to perceive in my unspoken misconceptions and failed to warn me about might at least have said to me, "Now, John, this ZOFRAN works really well, but don't be surprised if you have quite a bit of nausea. *This FCR is powerful stuff.*"

But, noooooooo! Not a one of them read my mind, and I am furious about it. They TOLD me, I HEARD them, but I didn't HEAR them. I certainly did not expect ZOFRAN to lose its effectiveness during round TWO of the chemo. Where does that leave me for rounds 3 through 6?

Like a famous historically fictional character in another melodramatic moment, I echo, "I'll think about it tomorrow."

Leave it for now, so that you will know: for most, NAUSEA comes with CHEMOTHERAPY. I lost six pounds this past week! I do not recommend CLL and Chemotherapy as a weight loss program. Do not try it at home!

PERSPECTIVE! My perspective has been changed. My perspective has been purged. My perspective has been modified by my experience. My perspective has been modified by an altered perception.

Has my perspective been contaminated with my murmurings and complainings about my own discomfort? If you say yes, then allow me to explain my changed perspective.

The father of an co-worker, a friend to my family, passed away last Friday, September 11, 2009. His name was Jim. He was also a patient of Hemosapien's. Jim had lung cancer. His chemotherapy treatments and radiation were so unbearable to him, he finally said, "Enough!" From that time forth, Jim saw very little of his home and far more of the inside of a hospital room. They buried Jim last Saturday. I got up early that morning, took my ZOFRAN, took a nice hot shower, shaved, and put on my favorite suit and a new tie. My wife remarked on how nice I looked. I was ready to go hours before I actually had to go, but as time went on, the ZOFRAN was becoming increasingly less effective. I finally gave up any hopes of going to Jim's funeral. I could not even talk to anyone on the telephone. Sorry, Daddy.

While I was originally complaining about no chairs, no coffee, the Spartan amenities offered by a private health practice in Meridian, Mississippi, versus the amenities offered by the number one cancer center on the EARTH, about having to wait a few minutes longer that I was supposed to in the waiting room, about the apparent confusion in those who were serving me, and about the increasing ineffectiveness of the ZOFRAN which lead to SOME nausea, Jim's final moments of life were being consumed by his cancer.

The pettiness of my complaints and observations slaps me in the face and are, at best, UNDERWHELMING in the face of the circumstances in which others find themselves.

What about Hemosapien and his partners and their private-practice-out-patient-Sonic-Drive-in-esque-Chemotherapy-Infusion-unit? I am thankful for them. My community is fortunate to have them here. It was certainly more convenient than the more amenable world-class accommodations in Texas. I was home every night, and feeling bad at HOME is far more preferable than feeling bad in another state, even if that state is the great and sovereign Lone-Star.

What about my nausea? As has been said so succinctly by some wise person in ages past, but handed down to us from the lips of grandmothers, "This, too, shall pass!"

Perspective! It's all about perspective! Mine is a whole lot better, now, but the price which others seemingly pay to teach me is prohibitively high.

If Calvin utters a word, I'll thrash him. Today is my Descartes day. Both knew that an absolute truth was out there. Descartes just wasn't sure what it was. He may have gone to his grave wondering what it was. I hope not.

Some days are like that. Some lives are like that.

9/26/09 Calmly, Now! And In Perspective!

My last post got me a few phone calls and several e-mails. Quoting the great philosopher, Lester Flatt, in his immortal song, ***Over the Hill to the Poorhouse***, raised some alarm. I think the last line of the chorus that I previously quoted did the trick. It was not some crafty, caged sentiment I was trying to imply to the reader. It is the Poorhouse part that was really on my mind. While it is possible that a complication from the CLL could crop up causing my rapid demise, say, acquiring the swine flu and having it wreak havoc due to my compromised immune system, that is not imminent, nor guaranteed. I am not in immediate peril from the CLL. In fact, the CLL currently is in flight from the chemo. While the chemo is working its magic on the disease, I am suffering from a few side effects which are unpleasant and unwelcome. It is a thing to be endured and I am enduring it.

The Poorhouse. In America, you don't go to prison for owing money. Thankfully, our founding fathers were disapprovingly familiar with English law which permitted one to be thus sequestered for debts. The only way I am aware of, in the United States, that one can be incarcerated for debts is not to pay your child support, and I say good on that.

In the days before bankruptcy laws, a debtor could be, after civil suit and judgment, summarily evicted from his own property with no further protection from the law. Now, a bankruptcy filing would protect one from this immediate threat. Many counties used to have an actual Poorhouse. That is where those debtors were allowed to live until such time as they could make their way out of it and back into better circumstances. It was mostly the old, the infirm, widows and orphans, and even then, a few chemically dependent persons, who inhabited the Poorhouse. While counties don't operate Poorhouses today, having other social safety nets available for their citizens, we have something similar in the elderly person with no assets who is no longer able to care for himself and the Medicaid/Nursing home scenario. You are all familiar with this.

Folk music has always had that maudlin and morose side, particularly that Appalachian variety of which I am so fond. We have Flatt & Scruggs singing about going ***Over the Hill to the Poorhouse***, and ***Jimmy Brown the Newsboy***, perishing out there in the cold with no hat upon his head and no shoes upon his feet. We have the Stanley Brothers singing about ***Mother's Not Dead, She's Only A Sleeping*** and of all things, ***The Terrible School Bus Wreck***, about the death and misery visited on children and families after a Kentucky school bus went over the rail and down the side of a mountain. While this actually happened, only Carter Stanley would have thought about celebrating this in a song. Ralph Stanley's, ***Oh! Death!***, also comes to mind. The lyrics, *I'm death I come to take the soul, Leave the body and leave it cold, To draw up the flesh off of the frame, Dirt and worm both have a claim*, are starkly less than subtle.

Then there is Bill Monroe singing about ***The Little Girl and the Dreadful Snake*** with some of the most blatantly maudlin lines I can recall, *"I heard the screams of my little girl far, far away, 'hurry Daddy there's and awful, dreadful snake'. I ran as fast as I could, through the dark and dreary wood, but I reached my darling girl too late."* One can almost imagine more lines, never written, or if so, wisely never published, perhaps going like this: *When I found her, legs swollen and blackened, flesh bursting with terrible pain. She screamed and she screamed and as in agony, her sweet soul old Satan would claim.* Of course, that last line is

my own fabrication magnifying the darkness of these songs, and what could be darker or more terrifying.

How about the Louvin Brothers singing about ***The Great Atomic Power***, a gospel song with promise, but what death and destruction they go through to get you there: *When the mushrooms of destruction could rain down upon our land, wreaking horrible destruction, blotting out the works of man*. True? It certainly could be, but the question is Why? We Bluegrass fans acknowledge and laugh about that side of the music and frequently refer to that fictitious song ***The Awful Fire at the Nursing Home***. The mental images created by that title at least equal those called forth by ***The Terrible School Bus wreck***.

These songs have tragic endings, and tragedy, as an art form, particularly in theatre, has been around for thousands of years. No doubt, tragedies help people deal with tragic circumstances they have experienced in their own lives, else, why would anyone waste any time on them? Shakespeare wrote comedies and tragedies, but far more of the latter than the former. Tragedy sells. Today, tragic romance is still a genre in movies and song.

Tragedy is one of the things we consistently face in our human experience, and I'm sure that among the people of Cambodia, there has been written a song that reflects the horror of Pol Pot and his killing fields. If it were done in the Bluegrass manner, we would have blatant descriptions, with absolutely no subtlety, of rotting flesh and torture and the smell of death. We catch a glimpse of this in Solzhenitsyn's ***Gulag Archipelago*** and ***A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich***. A glimpse in Ayn Rand's ***We the Living***. In Upton Sinclair's ***The Jungle***. In John Steinbeck's ***The Grapes of Wrath***. George Orwell's ***1984***. James Agee's ***Let Us Now Praise Famous Men***. Jerzey Kozinski's ***The Painted Bird***. More than a glimpse in a Dorothea Lange or Walker Evans photograph or in Civil War photographs, in WWI and WWII photos, and all the photos of the horrors Auschwitz, Bergen-Belzen, and others.

I suppose that if photographs and literature capture this stark, offensive reality in the most unsubtle of manners, by what manner of thinking would the song lyricist be denied?

Now on to perspective. Filters change our perspective. Much as a filter changes the light we let into our camera, the filters of experience and perspective change our thinking. Filters on our audio equipment reduce or eliminate certain frequencies which our ears find tedious and enhance others that our ears find pleasant. We have similar filters for our thinking when events are viewed from where we are standing, or at a particular moment.

Back to the lyrics of ***Oh! Death!***, the writer says, "My wealth is all at your command If you will move your icy hand." At this moment, I do not feel death's icy hand; therefore, I am still concerned with my bank account. Were the grip of that icy hand tightening around my throat, I might think the chemotherapy was a bargain at ANY price and be begging, borrowing, or stealing wherever things could be begged, borrowed, or stolen gladly to exchange it for another moment of life. The difference is perspective in the midst of a tempering circumstance.

Gooday says that he and his colleagues are hot on the trail of a cure for CLL. That is the truth from his perspective. I welcome his determination! He has devoted his entire professional career to this quest. But, what will it cost when the cure is found? If it exceeds my insurance resources, or my insurance won't pay for it, how will I proceed? They already have curative strategies, in the form of stem cell transplants, which I cannot pursue because I am not

currently a candidate (myriad hazards lurk for those getting stem cell transplants! It is a last resort!), but if I were, I could not afford it. But, would I trade everything I own for it? What if I trade everything I own and it, the cure, does not work? What if I trade everything I own and the cure works, but I get killed in a car wreck on the way home from having received the news from Gooday that, "You are now completely cured!" How would I answer Calvin when he says, "Your fate was foreordained from the very foundation of the universe."? Or Luther, when he says, "God foresaw this, and His foreseeing cannot be found to have been false, but He did not foreordain it"? And, what is the practical difference? What if a frog had wings?

What's a day worth? A week? A Month? A Year? If we died today, versus tomorrow, what is the value of that? Is our demise on one day versus another any less painful to those we leave behind? What is our money worth? What will we trade it for? What is our true wealth? All these things deserve careful pondering, but pondering only yields more questions with no hope of permanent answers. The answers change with perspective. The answers change with experience. The answers can change as often as the wind, or they can be as fixed as a pin-hole lens views any focal point from near to infinite space, no adjustment necessary. And fixed or variable, the answers we cling to can be wrong.

Hemosapien told me, "You have CLL. You will have CLL until you die from it, or from some complication of it, or with it, but you will have it until you die." That is the truth until Gooday and his colleagues around the world come up with a cure. Will I die from CLL today? The answer to that is: no there is not a chance that CLL will directly cause my demise today, September 26, 2009. Will I die today from some complication of the CLL? The answer to that is: while extremely unlikely, it is possible. Will I die today from something else? The answer to that is: the odds are far greater, but still not very likely that I will die today, for any reason. Will I die one day, regardless of the reason? That question is rhetorical and not worthy of an answer.

Will I one day die because of a complication caused by this lard biscuit with a piece of country ham that is currently in my left hand that I am enjoying immensely as I type this with my right hand, pecking with greasy fingers, the grease from my fingers shining on the keys? Does my enjoyment today mean my demise tomorrow? Will the ham biscuit have been worth it when Hemosapien and Gooday lean over my failing body and tell me, "Because of your proclivity to overindulge in anything other than Jack LaLanne type fresh asparagus and mango juice with pulp, your ham-lard-biscuit heart is failing, and we are no longer able to treat you for the CLL, which is directly killing you and will probably be finished with it's work in the next few minutes," and then adding, "Do you mind settling up on your bill before you pass?"

The answer? Well, that certainly is a matter of perspective. Since my heart is not failing me at the moment, the answer is resoundingly in favor of a second ham biscuit. The first one is now just a memory, the evidence of its existence being reduced to a certain sheen on my moustache, glistening, oiled keys on my computer keyboard, and a certain half-smile of satisfaction on my face, very similar to the one worn by Sylvester the Cat with Tweety-Bird stuffed in his mouth, a tail feather or two sticking out between his pursed lips, right before Granny takes a broom to him. Later on, when I am in the midst of dying, it may not seem so. It may seem that the ham biscuit was terribly expensive. I know this is true: If I am dying, and Hemosapien and Gooday are telling me that, and then they ask me about my account balance, I'd promise to pay them whether I could or not if they'll each bring me a ham biscuit!

Voltaire said, "Let each of us boldly and honestly say: How little it is that I really know!"

I am boldly and honestly declaring that I know very little, but I do know this: Both times I have been to chemo, and both times I have been to BATCC, and many times I have sat in Hemosapien's office waiting for my appointment, I have seen people who I believe would gladly trade everything they had, immediately and no questions asked, for something that promised them the hope of delivery from their disease, people who are in immediate peril of dying from their particular genetic anomaly that is cancer. Their perspective is different from mine, now. I am still looking for a bargain. How fortunate I am!



And sitting here on the front-porch, in the pre-dawn darkness, a distant thunderstorm lighting the Northeastern sky with brilliant flashes and a low, 60 hertz rumble, my wife coming out the door to my side, two steaming fresh cups of coffee in her hand, Maggie Mae sleeping peacefully inside, with two loyal dogs on the porch, restless and whining at the approaching thunderstorm, seeking the comforting scratch of their master's hand behind a willingly offered ear, and enjoying the peace and tranquility of this place in the midst of the increasing tension of the distantly approaching thunderstorm displaying nature's brilliant glory as she thunders and flashes, I have a fleeting thought that I am in heaven already.



I've also got this beautiful girl as my houseguest this weekend. She smiles at me whenever I look over in to her playpen, just as wide awake as she can be at this early hour.

What a way to start one's day! What a change of Perspective!

9/28/09 We Hear from Our Friends in Georgia

I got this e-mail last night:

Dear Debbie and Chris,

Sorry that we are so long in returning a greeting from Southwest Georgia. Grace has been very involved in working out a plan with her doctors based on our Houston experience and is having a tough go of it with the chemotherapy treatments. We enjoyed the two CD's you sent and thank you so much for sharing the music and we will check out your website for the videos. Hope all is going well for you and we did enjoy meeting you on our first visit to Houston.

Best Regards,

Mr. Grace

Debbie and I were gladdened to get that e-mail after such a long silence. Gladdened to get it and simultaneously saddened that it did not contain the good news we had hoped for. There is so much contained in this short e-mail. There is pain, suffering, determination, persistence, concern, care, and a whirlwind of trouble as well as hope. Mrs. Grace is in my earnest prayers. Mr. Grace, too!

The things contained in the short statement, "a tough go of it," can be considered at length by those who have had or are having a similar experience and not as completely, but with more dread, wonder, and speculation, by those who have not. The side effects of chemotherapy can be debilitating. The effects of no chemotherapy are even worse. The worst possible scenario is ineffective chemotherapy with debilitating side-effects. That is the place where many people find themselves, today. They and those loved ones who care for them are worthy of our prayers and support.

When you see them, and you should go see them if they are receiving, don't ask them how they are doing. It is too hard and wearying for them to formulate an answer to that question. Ask them, rather, about how they are doing, TODAY! It's OK not to ask them anything at all, rather just to be there and tell them you came to see them. If you're there in their midst and silent long enough and if they feel well enough, they'll talk. If not, they'll appreciate the briefest touch of your hand on theirs and your company. It is good to be cognizant of your surroundings and not overstay your welcome. Sometimes patients have so much on their mind they are driven to distraction. If their visitors take this personally as an affront, it is a grievous *faux pas*.

If they are not receiving, then you must understand. In the midst of the distractions of chemotherapy and dealing with terminal illness, the skin lesions, constipation, diarrhea, hair loss, projectile vomiting, compromised or non-existent immune systems, multiple organ crises or failures, not to mention post-surgery complications, all combining in the midst of the extremely personal mind-numbing thoughts of their own impending death in a manner not casual, the cancer patient may sometimes feel like they just can't be a good host. Sometimes, they just don't feel like chit-chatting! That's when a card works wonders!

10/6/09 Able Was I Ere I Saw the Poorhouse

I borrowed the title from Napoleon Bonaparte. I hope he doesn't mind. Why should he? I gave him proper credit and he is, shall we say, currently (and permanently) retired. He had his poorhouse, too. In fact, he had two of them.

"Able was I ere I saw Elba," he said.

Elba, his first place of exile, an island in the Mediterranean just off the coast of the French Riviera must have seemed splendid compared to his final and ultimate place of exile, the island of St. Helena, cold and damp in the Eastern Atlantic hundreds of miles off the West coast of Africa. If you are not familiar with that famous Napoleon quote, look at it again. Look at it even further. Move your face closer to the screen, and REALLY look at it. Read it carefully, then, read it backwards. Isn't that clever? Though this famously clever quotation is attributed to Napoleon, I have my doubts.

More than likely, what he really said was, "Able was I ere I thought that Russia was ripe for invasion!"

He then probably said, "Able was I ere I failed to learn contentment!"

From Longwood, his poorhouse home on St. Helena (actually a mansion, not a palace like Malmaison, though for the location . . .!) he was later overheard to have said, "You think THIS is miserable? Try this: riding horse-back all the way from Moscow to Paris, in JANUARY, with a bunch of pissed-off Russians behind you, with a bad case of bleeding piles! That's misery right up the old you-know-what! An empire-sized pain in the imperial ass!"

It is entirely possible that not a single palindrome has been written since the invention of TV; its electronic opium consumes the time people formerly spent in reading, conversation, and contemplation just to pass time which could seem to move at the speed of a drifting continent. We've traded those three delightful things for the lowest common denominator of talk show trash, bad TV news, and insipid 30 minute sitcoms with bad writing, bad acting, bad jokes, and the jiggle shot. Naturally, I have excluded coverage of SEC and NFL football games. The reader will understand and no doubt approve of this exclusion.

"I would like to complain about the lack of activities here on St. Helena. I sure would like to have a satellite TV hookup if I could get it!" declared Napoleon. "Looking over the St. Helena landscape watching the sheep graze as I have done for the last 365 days in a row, when it wasn't raining, is beginning to become rather tedious," he added.

"What is satellite TV, General?" asked Sir Hudson Lowe, the English commander on St. Helena, technically Napoleon's jailer, refusing to call him Emperor, recognizing him only as "General," which infuriated him.

"You English are so not with it!" Napoleon said huffily, as he turned his old mare back towards his Poorhouse, trotting off into the cold, misting wind, looking rather silly as his short, formerly

imperial self sat perched on two pillows atop his saddle. The concerned look on his face was worthy of a freshman congressman on C-Span trying to look important while addressing no



one during the after-hours orders. Mourning the thought of the excess time on his hands, Napoleon had to ponder all the things his most recent flare-up of the piles forced him to recall, and unable to endure the trot of the horse, he reduced the gait to a slow, slow walk, and noticeably grimaced at each step.

"Me! Me! The glory of Europe reduced to a mere walk on an old nag in this god-forsaken place!" he cried to himself. "And not even the comfort of Satellite TV!" He hung his head as low as the bony nag upon which he sat in greatly pillowed discomfort and despair, a mere shadow of his former self. Such do all men become when discontent becomes the thing to which they cling.

Little of what has been reported here of this glimpse into the personal final days of Napoleon has been recorded by the historians. The reader is advised to make his own assessment of its veracity.

I suppose Napoleon would say that things did not work out like he planned. He was not alone in that. So many things don't work out like we plan. Napoleon planned on being the emperor of all Europe, a restored Rome with Gaul as its new capitol and himself as its new Caesar. Some just plan on having a normal life: grow up, get a rewarding job, find a girl, get married, raise a family, and then retire peacefully, trying to enjoy each milestone of life and those periods in between while staying healthy and avoiding the poorhouse.

The juxtaposition of those two seems ludicrous, doesn't it, Napoleon and his plans and an ordinary life? But it only seems so on the surface; read just a little deeper and it is easy to see that both are difficult to achieve. Life has so many variables, some of them too dark for contemplation.

In today's economic climate, the person who had an adjustable rate mortgage and played the game he was encouraged to play—thinking that there was no real payday for years of credit abuses, encouraged by fiscal entities and our government to believe that one could spend one's self to prosperity—has about as much chance of avoiding the modern poorhouse as becoming emperor of Europe in a restored Roman empire. Debt is the new modern-day slavery. Other than perhaps the chemical things that normally addict human beings, debt is the only slavery that one willingly submits one's self to that I am aware of.

I promised to report on the costs of chemo. Below is the first chemo bill from Hemosapien, which covers my second round. You can compare this to what it cost at Big-as-Texas Cancer Center. There is a big difference. I will publicly eat some crow later, for now, though, here's Hemosapien's bill.

Hemosapien, Et. Al., PLLC DBA Drive-in Chemo Clinic Meridian, MS 39301 <i>Two-for-one Special on Wednesdays. Open Late on Friday Nights after Football Games!</i> <i>Bring your own coffee!!</i>		<small>IF PAYING BY CREDIT CARD, FILL OUT BELOW. (VISA 16 digit number on the back of your credit card.)</small> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 2px;"> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> MASTERCARD </div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> VISA </div> <div> <input type="checkbox"/> DISCOVER </div> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div>GARD NUMBER</div> <div>VIN #</div> <div>AMOUNT</div> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div>SIGNATURE</div> <div>EXP. DATE</div> </div> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div>STATEMENT DATE 09/28/09</div> <div>PAY THIS AMOUNT</div> <div>ACCT. # 0000</div> </div> </div>	
PAGE 1		SHOW AMOUNT PAID HERE \$	
ADDRESSEE:		REMIT TO:	
Mississippi Chris Sharp c/o POORHOUSE Porterville, MS 39352		Hemosapien, Et. Al., PLLC DBA Drive-in Chemo Clinic Meridian, MS 39301	

☐ Please check box if above address is incorrect or insurance information has changed, and indicate change(s) on reverse side.

STATEMENT

PLEASE DETACH AND RETURN TOP PORTION WITH YOUR PAYMENT

Dx Code	DATE	Proc Code	Patient Name	Detail	Patient Due	Insurance Due
				BAL. FORWARD AS OF 08/25/09	29.68	289.00
	09/09/09	24959		PERSONAL PAYMENT	- .97	
	09/09/09	24959		PERSONAL PAYMENT	-4.41	
	09/09/09	24959		PERSONAL PAYMENT	-9.66	
	09/09/09	24959		PERSONAL PAYMENT	-2.57	
	09/09/09	24959		PERSONAL PAYMENT	-12.07	
	08/28/09			OVS6M LEVEL III		99.00
	08/28/09			OVCBC		44.00
	08/28/09			OVCMP 4-00		70.00
	08/28/09			OVLACTATE DEHYDROGENASE,		30.00
	08/28/09			OVCOLLECTION OF SPECIMEN		18.00
	09/08/09			OVBMP		63.00
	09/08/09			OVCBC		44.00
	09/08/09			OVCOLLECTION OF SPECIMEN		18.00
	09/08/09			OVCYTOXAN, 100 mg		25.00
	09/08/09			OVCYTOXAN, 500 mg		65.00
	09/08/09			OVFLUDARA, 50 mg (no shelf)		900.00
	09/08/09			OVRITUXAN 100 mg		10200.00
	09/08/09			OVBENADRYL, 50 mg		15.00
	09/08/09			OVHEXADROL		50.00
	09/08/09			OVKYTRIL 100 mcg		350.00
	09/08/09			OVCHEMO ADMIN IV INFUSION UP 1		350.00
	09/08/09			OVEACH ADD HOUR OF CHEMO INFUS		450.00
	09/08/09			OVEA ADD SEQUENTIAL IV UP TO 1		340.00
	09/08/09			OVADD SEQUENTIAL UP TO 1 HR		120.00
	09/08/09			OVEA ADD SEQUEN IV PU OF A NEW		70.00
	09/09/09			OVCYTOXAN, 100 mg		25.00
	09/09/09			OVCYTOXAN, 500 mg		65.00
	09/09/09			OVFLUDARA, 50 mg (no shelf)		900.00
	09/09/09			OVKYTRIL 100 mcg		350.00
	09/09/09			OVCHEMO ADMIN IV INFUSION UP 1		350.00
	09/09/09			OVEA ADD SEQUENTIAL IV UP TO 1		170.00
	09/09/09			OVEA ADD SEQUEN IV PU OF A NEW		70.00
	09/10/09			OVCYTOXAN, 100 mg		25.00
	09/10/09			OVCYTOXAN, 500 mg		65.00
	09/10/09			OVFLUDARA, 50 mg (no shelf)		900.00

CURRENT	30 DAYS	60 DAYS	90 DAYS	120 DAYS

STATEMENT DATE	PATIENT PAY TO DATE	ACCOUNT NUMBER
09/28/09	360.78	

INSURANCE DUE
CONTINUE

Had to get a new calculator. Ours did not have enough decimal places.

**** PAYMENT DUE UPON RECEIPT ****
**** THANK YOU ****

Hemosapien, Et. Al., PLLC
DBA Drive-in Chemo Clinic
Meridian, MS 39301

STANB 136692
8036911

IF PAYING BY CREDIT CARD, FILL OUT BELOW. (WRITE 3-4 digit number on the back of your credit card)

CHECK CARD USING FOR PAYMENT			
<input type="checkbox"/> MASTERCARD	<input type="checkbox"/> VISA	<input type="checkbox"/> DISCOVER	
CARD NUMBER	VIN #	AMOUNT	
SIGNATURE		EXP. DATE	
STATEMENT DATE	PAY THIS AMOUNT	ACCT. #	
09/28/09	.00		

PAGE 2 SHOW AMOUNT PAID HERE \$

ADDRESSEE:

REMIT TO:

Mississippi Chris Sharp
c/o POORHOUSE
Porterville, MS 39352

Hemosapien, Et. Al., PLLC
DBA Drive-in Chemo Clinic
Meridian, MS 39301

Please check box if above address is incorrect or insurance information has changed, and indicate change(s) on reverse side.

STATEMENT

PLEASE DETACH AND RETURN TOP PORTION WITH YOUR PAYMENT

Dx Code	DATE	Proc Code	Patient Name	Detail	Patient Due	Insurance Due
	09/10/09			OVKYTRIL 100 mcg		350.00
	09/10/09			OVCHEMO ADMIN IV INFUSION UP 1		350.00
	09/10/09			OVEA ADD SEQUENTIAL IV UP TO 1		170.00
	09/10/09			OVEA ADD SEQUEN IV PU OF A NEW		70.00
** YOU R INSURANCE HAS BEEN BILLED **						

CURRENT	30 DAYS	60 DAYS	90 DAYS	120 DAYS
.00	.00	.00	.00	.00

STATEMENT DATE	PATIENT PAY TO DATE	ACCOUNT NUMBER
09/28/09	360.78	

INSURANCE DUE
17470.00

PLEASE PAY THIS AMOUNT	.00
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** PAYMENT DUE UPON RECEIPT **
** THANK YOU **

If you will go back, you'll see that my first round of chemo at BATCC cost, before any PPO contractual discounts, \$37,000.00 and some change. It looks like at Hemosapien's clinic, the cost before PPO contractual discounts is \$17,470 .00. That, my friends, is a \$20,000 dollar difference. It is not completely apples to apples, yet, since there are lab fees and doctor fees in the BATCC amount that are not included in Hemosapien's bill. If I deduct what I think are other fees, BATCC's bill for the chemo related services is \$29,778.85. Now it appears that we are down to a net-net comparison. The difference between BATCC's \$29,778.85 and Hemosapien's \$17,470 is \$12,308.85. After the PPO discounts kick in, we'll see what the real net-net comparison is.

I asked for a detailed bill from BATCC and they sent me one for the physician services only, no hospital or pharmacy charges were included in the detailed bill. I asked again, and they sent me one that had the lab charges. Are they reluctant to send me a detailed bill for the chemo and hospital part? I will ask a third time. I find it ironic that the statement they sent had all the charges on it, but apparently a detailed bill must be asked for three times and sent to you over three different mailings. Of course, if that is the case, it is a human fabrication that has made it so. The statement sent to me is a summary of the individual charges. The summary is based on detailed individual charges that are the very basis for the summary. I'll bet that the computer software menu on BATCC's computer says something like this: "Press <ALT><F9> to print out a detailed customer statement." It should be so simple.

\$12,308.85? What a difference! For \$12,000+ I will bring my own coffee!

The crow? I've already started eating it. While it looks like I'll run substantially over my annual insurance limit, I appreciate Hemosapien and the value that his clinic offers me. I have already asked him to help me control my costs, and he has already done so more than once. My early comparisons of Hemosapien's clinic and BATCC were based on an ignorant speculation, which was all I had at the time. Some of my ignorance has been ameliorated; some of it has not, but the ignorant part that remains is there because I am too ignorant to recognize it as ignorance. When a pertinent factual ignorance-modifier is sent my way, it is noted, digested, and carefully applied to the "CREDIT" column on the ignorance ledger. Unfortunately, the balance I owe to ignorance is still pretty high. As what I owe to Hemosapien and BATCC increases, the balance I owe to ignorance comes down. When the ignorant balance reaches zero, I will owe lots of money to others.

But, hasn't the personal life-education that frees one from ignorance, the old "school of hard knocks," the old "live-and-learn," always been expensive? It's as expensive as the treatment of a serious disease. It's as expensive as chemotherapy. Sometimes, the lessons that life teaches can be fatal before the lesson is completely learned. How expensive are those lessons? What would those who learned so harshly trade in money for the chance to go back to earlier lessons and apply what they learned to their lives to prevent the harsh lesson they would then know is approaching? There is no way to place a monetary value on this. There is no way to go back and recapture a lost life's lesson. We must all learn in real time.

I am off today to start round three of the chemo.

I will bring a thermos filled with coffee. I gleefully got the old thermos out last night. I can think of 12,000 reasons why I am proud to bring my thermos.

I'll see Hemosapien. I'll tell him that y'all said hello if you'd like. In fact, I'll tell him that hundreds of you readers sent him your best regards. He'll like that. He'll read this here and know that I made it up, but he'll laugh about it. He is a good sport. You'd like to meet him away from his office. He's a very nice fellow. I hope you never have to meet him in his office as your physician, or as the physician for someone you love. He'd understand that, too!

BATCC and Hemosapien's clinic? They are simultaneously similar and yet worlds apart. Hemosapien does not focus on research. He and the other physicians there will never win any Nobel prizes for medicine. They will go to work every day and treat their patients to the best of their abilities, using every tool, procedure and pharmacological innovation available to them for the care and well-being of their patients. They will have some great victories in their

treatment of their patients. They will also have some great defeats. They will enjoy those victories and wear their laurel wreaths for the glorious moment those victories provide them until they are forced to return to their reality of very ill people who depend on them for treatments that will prolong, or give them back their lives. They will painstakingly search for words to offer hope to some who, in all reality, know that their hope is abandoning them.

They will try not to let the disease that is cancer get to them. They will try to maintain their clinical detachment. They will be mostly successful in this, but at times, their professional training and clinical detachment will fail them utterly, and as humans beings are wont to do, they will try to blame themselves and their own ignorance for what they perceive to be their personal failure. They will think that their best is not good enough. They know better than this, but they will do so anyway.

Hemosapien and his clinic colleagues are not alone in this. Gooday faces the same thing—he and his colleagues at BATCC, many of them potential candidates for that Nobel prize. They will treat their patients and study and research every possible avenue to try to find new treatments and cures for this disease called cancer that affects so many of us—nearly all of us if something else doesn't kill us first. Hemosapien will benefit from their research. His patients will benefit, too.

I wish them all great success!

The Poorhouse? If I am fortunate, I'll live long enough to be able to get in it. If so, then I'll at least be in good company; Napoleon lived there, too. He'd be glad to see me. I enjoy good conversation. I enjoy lively debate. I am fascinated by this person who managed to accomplish tremendous things in light of his modest beginnings, though he did so with much blood on his hands, because of which, I am not envious of him.

Maybe when they send me to the Poorhouse, I'll be able to bring my recently disconnected but still functional Satellite TV receiver and a TV. We'll watch some football games together. I'd teach him to be an Ole Miss fan and a Giants fan. Of course he'd immediately be a Saints fan because of New Orleans' French heritage. In the middle of a play, he'd shout out directions to Drew Brees in French. When an official made a bad call, he'd furiously cuss him, abandoning the French, which would not come fast enough to his mind, in favor of his native Italian (or eye-talian as my Grandfather would say!).

"Italian?" the reader now asks himself as if I did not know what I am talking about, adding smugly, "Napoleon was French! Italian wasn't his native language".

During the commercials and at half-time, Napoleon could tell me all about his retreat from Moscow on the hard-frozen Russian steppes while suffering terribly from bleeding hemorrhoids.

I'd hardly be able to sit still while he was in the midst of the telling!

10/8/09 We're All Just Passing Through

We're all just here for a little while. We're all just passing through. That's what I wrote the song about that appears below. We have so much in common with each other. We are all human. We all have hopes and dreams. We all have aspirations. We have victories. We all stumble. We all fail. We all waste precious time and energy worrying about things which are insignificant in the long run, and fail to do the things that REALLY matter in the eternal scheme. Does that make us wicked? (That is rhetorical: Don't answer!) It certainly makes us human, rapidly and directly proceeding to the same earthly fate common to all humanity. Perhaps today is a day when, within the reach of our arm, we can extend our influence to touch someone else's life in a way that makes his or her journey more pleasant, the load less heavy. It could be just a kind word, or a smile.

"All mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated...As therefore the bell that rings to a sermon, calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come: so this bell calls us all: but how much more me, who am brought so near the door by this sickness...No man is an island, entire of itself...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

JOHN DONNE

Donne said it very well.



There but for the grace of God goes John Bradford
John Bradford, English Reformer

John said that while watching a group of prisoners go to their execution at the tower of London shortly before his own execution there. It was later modified to, "There but for the grace of God go I," and frequently, but erroneously, attributed to St. Paul as a quotation from the Bible. It is right up there with the old bible quotation, "Cleanliness is next to Godliness," which is **Poor Richard's Almanac** (Ben Franklin) rather than the Bible. John knew that everyone else's existence and fate was just like his own. In his poignant remark, there is no hint of haughtiness as is so common when this remark is heard coming from the lips of others.

St. Paul, in reply (Some Chris-fabricated words being placed very carefully, fearfully, and with the greatest respect in his mouth):

"I did not say that. I was perhaps the first and foremost proponent of God's grace in the Christian era, and while I agree completely with this statement, it cannot be rightfully attributed to me. I did say this, though, ***"For though I would desire to glory, I shall not be a fool; for I will say the truth: but now I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he seeth me to be, or that he heareth of me. And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And He said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong."*** II Corinthians 12:6-10



One might say, "We're All Just Passing Through!" That's the name a song I wrote. I wrote it a long time before I had any idea about having Leukemia but after I had started, somewhere along the road to maturity, to realize that my lot and condition in the human experience was similar to everyone else's. I was special without being special, an anachronism that is inescapable in contemplation. This recording of the song was done just one month after they told me I had Leukemia. I was overwhelmed with the sense that I must perform this song. It had become far more personal to me than it was when I originally wrote it. I hope you like it. It was written for you. For some it will contain despair. I see in it the hope that is common in all mankind.

10/10/09 Oh, Retch-ed Day!

Certainly you don't think I don't know how to spell W-R-E-T-C-H-E-D. I spelled it the way I needed to. The reader will make his own extrapolations as to why I spelled it this way.

Hemosapien? God bless him! On Tuesday, right before I started my first day of round three of the chemo, before the start of the long day of Rituximab infusion, and after reading my blog, he motioned for me to follow him. Down a second hall and in a little offset cubicle and in a clandestine, conspiratorial manner, he pointed to a coffee pot.

"This is the employee coffee pot!" he said with a big grin. "Help yourself anytime you want some!"

I was scheduled to return to BATCC in November, between chemo round 3 and 4 for a bone-marrow biopsy and labs. I was now becoming fearful of the expense of this. After communicating with Nurse Susan at BATCC and inquiring about the possibilities of having the biopsy done in Meridian rather than Houston, she said that it was possible, but she would have to check with Gooday. I copied Hemosapien on the e-mail.

He responded, "It looks like the final decision on the biopsy rests with Gooday."

I responded back, somewhat arrogantly, "It could very well be that the final decision on the biopsy rests with me!"

The truth of the matter is this. If Gooday had said it was necessary, I would have gone back to Houston. They graciously have agreed to let me have ALL the chemo in Meridian, as well as the necessary biopsies and labs. I will return to Houston eight weeks after the complete chemo course is over for labs and follow-up.

Nurse Susan e-mailed Hemosapien as follows:

Hi Dr. Hemosapien:

Mr. Sharp can have his bone-marrow done with you instead of the expense of coming to Houston to BATCC. Please do a bone-marrow at least 28 days after cycle 3 and before cycle 4. Use your discretion if his ANC is too low wait for recover so we get a good sample. It can be longer than 28 days just not shorter.

Please do a bone-marrow aspiration and biopsy with limited flow cytometry (CD5/CD19, kappa, lambda).

Once the sample is complete, please send a report and slides to our office, so we can have it read and obtain the data.

Thank you for helping with our research and our mutual patient.

I am thankful that so many people are watching out for me, doing their best to serve me and see that I get the things I really need. Sometimes in the pursuit of this blog, I am

unappreciative, petty, and belligerent, but their efforts on my behalf are not unnoticed and are sincerely appreciated.

The feral hogs that are interloping on our property are like an unwanted virus in our bodies; they damage things you don't want damaged, they destroy things you don't want destroyed, they run off wildlife that is there by natural right and compete with them for food, they cost you money you don't want to spend. Here, they only have one natural control on their existence: Me and my cousin Dennis.

Our own bodies have mechanisms to ward off viral and bacterial infections, or control them if they invade. My body's B cells are mostly not working right. They are genetically defective little cells called lymphocytes. They cannot do their job properly. Viral and bacterial infections represent a hazard for me since their natural enemies in my body are compromised by cancer and its treatment. One could get me!

I am the B-cell type hunter of the feral hog virus. I am the NK (Natural Killer) cell. I am a part of their natural environment! (How could I not be? They are here and I am here!) I am the thing they have to worry about. If they encounter me, it is not good for them; I will take them out.

Last Tuesday, after I had finished my long day of rituximab infusion—rituximab itself being an antibody produced in mice for use in humans, which is why it takes so long to give because my own body says, "Now, just wait a minute!!!"—and being pumped up on anti-nausea medicine and steroids, the steroids making me aggressive (just ask my wife!) and feeling like an 18 year-old linebacker on an all-star team, I headed down to the woods in NK-mode to hog hunt. In the photo on the right, you can see the bandage covering the IV port still in my left hand. I was rebuked by the nurses who said that I really didn't need to get wild-pig blood on my IV port, else my own NK cells be overwhelmed with things they can't handle. I received their rebuke in the nature in which it was intended.



I did my job. The hog presented itself, and ol' NK me just took it right on out of this life. The deer that it ran out of the field did not seem to mind, but seemed rather relieved the next day when I counted fifteen of them in the field. Some will abhor my behavior, this wanton killing of an animal. I would remind them of our stereo vision and canine teeth; that humans are predators part of other animal's natural environment. If you think I am wrong, that's OK; we can still be friends. I am unapologetic. Pick your battles; you can't win this one.

The hog, a sow about 65 pounds, was dispatched with one excellently placed shot, which was set on a precision ballistic course of my choosing and struck in exactly the intended place,

from about 150 yards out. The hog never had a chance upon its encounter with me. It has already been turned into barbecue by my friend Thomas, providing sustenance for him and his family. Just an hour earlier than the hog was delivered, Thomas told my cousin, Dennis, that he sure would like a wild hog to barbecue. Dennis helped me load up the hog and we took it to Thomas, incredulous at how quick he got his wish. He said, "Boy, y'all don't fool around, do you?"

Nope, when I am in NK mode, I don't fool around. I hope my own NK cells are as diligent. Yours, too!

10/21/09 Happy Anniversary (No kidding!)

As a cancer patient, I am now one year old, a significant milestone many persons with cancer never reach. I am thankful for the miracle of modern medicine.

"The world is mine, thanks to the miracle of modern medicine," said Alexander the Great, after taking the medicine his physician gave him right before his mysterious, youthful death.

"I came; I saw; I conquered through the miracle of modern medicine," said the epileptic Julius Caesar early on the morning of March 15, 44 B.C.

(And by the way, that is B.C. [Before Christ] I'm not falling for that BCE [Before Common Era] tripe. Someone is trying to fool themselves into really thinking that Jesus was not a major impact on the world! I'm tired of sensitivity and history revisionism. A wise man once wrote, "Thinking themselves wise they become fools!" There is a world-wide pandemic of terminal-foolishness syndrome, and, unfortunately, it is spread by direct human contact when vacuous young minds meet university professors in schools of education, humanities, liberal arts, fine arts, and social and political sciences, whose education exceeded their intellectual understanding, causing a brain short-circuit erasing all common sense capabilities; and this syndrome is, I fear, beyond the reach of the miracle of modern medicine.)

"Let them eat cake and have the miracle of modern medicine" said Marie Antoinette, thinking her surgeon could reattach her head.



I'm feeling better, thanks to the miracle of modern medicine

Mozart

(shortly before being buried in an unmarked pauper's grave)

"Able was I ere I saw the miracle of modern medicine," said Napoleon, poisoned by his British keepers on St. Helena.

"War is Hell without the miracle of modern medicine," said U.S. Grant, or W.T. Sherman, depending on the historian.

"Go west young miracle of modern medicine," said Horace Greeley to an impecunious and recently graduated medical student.

"My cough is better, thanks to the miracle of modern medicine," said Doc Holliday to Wyatt Earp right after a big gunfight.

"The miracle of modern medicine is dead," said Frederick Nietzsche in an empty lecture hall.

"They can put my ear back on, thanks to the miracle of modern medicine," said Vincent Van Gogh.

"We have nothing to fear but the miracle of modern medicine," said Franklin D. Roosevelt during his inaugural address.

"I shall return through the miracle of modern medicine," said Douglas MacArthur, escaping Corregidor by boarding a submarine bound for Australia.

"You're fired," said Harry S. Truman to Douglas MacArthur, adding, "What the hell has any damn miracle of modern medicine got to do with it?"

"Never before in the field of human conflict has so much been owed by so many to the miracle of modern medicine," said Winston S. Churchill during the big WW2.

"Ask not what the miracle of modern medicine can do for you, ask what you can do for the miracle of modern medicine," said John Fitzgerald Kennedy during his inaugural speech.

"One small step for man; one giant leap for the miracle of modern medicine!" said Neil Armstrong as he planted his foot on the moon.

"We made baseball history, thanks to the miracle of modern medicine," said Mark McGuire, Sammy Sosa, and Barry Bonds, just recently.

"We were able to keep up our hectic celebrity lifestyles, thanks to the miracle of modern medicine," said Elvis, Jimi, Janis, Jim, Keith, Gram and Michael, at a recent meeting of the Famous Young Deceased Persons Luncheon in Valhalla.

"I reached market weight almost two months sooner than my grandparents, thanks to the miracle of modern medicine," one hog was recently overheard bragging to another on the slaughter house unloading ramp.

"Free sugar cubes of the miracle of modern medicine," said Jonas Salk, with Franklin D. Roosevelt and my Uncle Joe thinking he was perhaps a little late.

"You can continue to enjoy smoking and good health, thanks to the miracle of modern medicine," said a recent, but unpublished study conducted by the New Re-Aligned Tobacco Growers and Marketers Association.

I am a big Jack Benny fan and recently ran across a six DVD set of the old Jack Benny Show. I marveled at the cigarette commercials the producers very wisely left intact on the shows,

particularly, the one that showed that doctors as a group were far more likely to smoke Lucky Strikes than other brands; one commercial even had a man identifying himself as a physician, saying, while puffing in the most delighted manner on his Lucky, that since doctors preferred them, they were obviously the most healthy brand. Lucky doctor; he smoked Luckys. If we wanted to be successful, healthful professional type persons, we should smoke Luckys, too.

I had a friend who had a foul-natured, foul-smelling, flea-bitten dog with one eye, three legs, a bad case of mange. He had a tick lodged so far down in his ear that it was interfering with his sense of balance so bad that he had to walk in wide arcs, always turning to the left like a NASCAR driver. I asked him the dog's name.

"That's old Lucky," he said.

"Lucky?" I inquired with raised eyebrows. "What an ironic name for such an obviously unlucky dog."

"Well, he's certainly lucky to still be with us," my friend said.

Nonplussed, I had no answer. A rare occurrence.

One year is a milestone, for sure. The statistics indicate that the median survival of persons with my particular brand of CLL is seven years after diagnosis. That leaves me six if I'm the median, or more, or less if not.

"We're working furiously to come up with a cure for this disease and are hot on its trail," said Gooday. Like Franklin D. Roosevelt and my Uncle Joe, I'd rather them come up with that sugar cube sooner than later.

"Well, do you think it might be as early as next week?" I asked Gooday.

"No, I think it would be rather over optimistic to hope for this as early as next week," he said.

"Well, perhaps, then, before my annual insurance limit is reached?" me with another question.

"You'll have to give us a little more time than that!"

"Well, for goodness sake, hurry up! I'm depending on y'all and the miracle of modern medicine."

"Modern medicine certainly is miraculous," said Gooday.

"That's what King George III's physicians said as they were BLEEDING him nearly to death every day trying to cure his mental illness," I replied.

"But these are modern times," said Hemosapien. "We know so much more now."

"And those weren't modern times? There's so much more to be WRONG about now. Used to, a doctor could simply be wrong and bury their patient. Now they have to be wrong ABOUT something before burying the patient," I, jaded and cynical, replied.

"You should take a valium and get some rest. You're a walking demonstration of sleep-deficit," said Hemosapien to me, and I finally realized I was having a conversation with them in a dream, or was I dreaming that I was dreaming?

"I don't have any valium!" I said, then drifted back to a fretful sleep, which is how sleep has been coming these days. I seem to go for several days on two-hours sleep, then suddenly, I'll sleep for seven hours. Hemosapien and I talked about this, and I asked him to talk with Mainmost. I don't know if he has done so, but we have come up with a workable plan, Hemosapien and I.

One of the important things for a physician to know about sleep is this: Do you have trouble GOING to sleep or STAYING asleep? I can GO to sleep immediately. I can't seem to STAY there. I know it's my restless legs syndrome (RLS) causing it because I JERK wide awake, suddenly. Once I wake up, that's it. I'm up! I'm also certain that the chemotherapy has exacerbated this situation.

We added one additional medicine to the medications I am already taking for RLS, and this seems to be helping. The RLS medication line-up now:

- 3 each .25mg Mirapex (A drug used to stop involuntary movements in Parkinson's patients which is also prescribed for RLS)
- ½ of a 10/500 Lortab (codeine and acetaminophen—The codeine stimulates the receptors in the brain and allows the Mirapex to STICK to all the right places, since RLS is the unauthorized and unwanted firing of neurons in the brain.)
- 1 each OTC Benadryl (Diphenhydramine)—This makes you sleepy, anyway, and also makes the codeine work better. Dr. Chris added this himself without any counsel from the other physicians.
- And, Hemosapien added this: 1 each 10mg diazepam, which is an anti-anxiety drug, also makes you sleepy, and is also used to treat RLS (popularly known as Mother's Little Helper. You might call it Chris's little helper, too. I am glad to have this and am thankful for it!!)

This combination seems to do the trick, *SOMETIMES!*

I must take the Mirapex Before 6:00PM or NOTHING seems to work. I take the others right before I am ready to go to bed. They put me out like a tripped circuit breaker that has seen a direct-to-ground bolted fault. I still go along and have a night or two with two hours sleep, but mostly am sleeping 4 to 6 per night, occasionally seven. Once, recently, I slept for an entire nine hours. I had not done this in years.

I have also learned this since I have been taking the Lortab/Mirapex combination for about six years now: You cannot leave your Lortabs out where they can be seen by visitors to your house. They will disappear. I have several friends who seem to have picked up a nasty addiction to opiates. Three of them are on Methadone maintenance, and I think a couple of others need to be. I now keep the Lortab/Mirapex locked in my gun safe! It's hard to get in there. I keep three or four in my Mirapex bottle and when I need more, I add them. They no longer seem to disappear. Some of my friends no longer come over as much.

When I was (much) younger, I suppose I fooled around with recreational drugs as much as any young experimenter:

- Marijuana, which I really did NOT like, produced in me a general paranoia I found extremely unpleasant.
- Speed (There was no cheap methamphetamine back then, thank God!), which seemed to be, to me, a drug one only used if one was required to stay up all night and study for exams or drive on a long trip.
- Downers (Reds, Quaaludes, etc.) – I tried them and wondered why people wanted to be down. I thought they were a complete waste of my time
- Cocaine? I sure liked to snort cocaine and did so nearly every time someone offered me a snort. Fortunately, this country boy was far too impecunious to be able to afford the \$100 it would cost for a gram—something that me and two buddies could use up in a two-minute period and which simply made us feel good for a while, when I was naturally feeling pretty good to begin with. (I just got on my knees, literally and no kidding, and thanked the Lord that there was no CRACK COCAINE when I was in this period of my life!)
- Opiates, other than Heroin? Well, pills were around back then, but they were downers, too. Why, I wondered.
- Heroin? Not a chance! I had two close friends who were heroin addicts. They are both dead now. They were first cousins. They were both brilliant, gifted musicians. They were both funny and witty, both brilliant gifted conversationalists, knowledgeable on any subject you could think of. I mean knowledgeable to the point where if you'd just shut up and listen, you'd learn something useful, interesting, and at a level far deeper than mere surface acquaintance. They both had photographic memories, and I suppose never forgot anything. Whatever it was in their genetic makeup that made them photographic-memory-brilliant-musician-witty-funny-renaissance-man-cousins may have well been the very thing that made them heroin addicts. They were a few years older than me, and I was able to learn many wonderful things from them: that once heroin sinks her foul claws deep in your skin, she does not readily let go; that heroin is a demon that will strip your soul and leave you an empty shell, like worms eating your insides out so that only your skin is left, which is how they described it to me. I loved them both so much, miss them terribly, and think of them every day. Even now, my heart hurts and I still mourn their loss. There is an empty spot in my life that can never be filled. It cost them and their families a lot for me to be able to learn that lesson from them. What a gift they gave me. I am so thankful at having been able to be their friend.
- LSD and other hallucinogenics (peyote, psilocybin, etc.). This is a different story. I was smitten. They seemed made exclusively for me, particularly the magic mushrooms growing in the piles of cow manure in all of my grandfather's cow pastures. They were free. They were everywhere after a rain. They were there for the taking.

"I wish you'd get back to work and quit fooling around with those mushrooms," my granddaddy would say. "What do you do with those things?"

"They're good to eat," I'd say, "but I don't think you'd like them, Granddaddy!"

"I wouldn't like eating anything with cow shit on it," he'd say back, shaking his head as he got into his truck to drive off, leaving me to work the cows and pick my mushrooms.

That's enough said about that. I sure did like them at the time, though. I think they made me see things differently in life in general. They are behind me now, having worked their magic, whether it was good or bad. If I knew then what I know now, I

would not have experimented with them, but I was less wise then, and only slightly more wise now—and just about this, nothing else.

I have had the unfortunate opportunity to witness several of my friends trade their homes, wives, careers, bank accounts, and sometimes their liberty to support their addiction to prescription pain-killers. I have been very cognizant of that since I have taken one myself for several years. Mainmost told me that I was not a candidate for addiction since I had shown no signs of it during the several years he has had me on the codeine.

“If you continue to treat it as the medicine it is, and not abuse it, you will not develop an addiction,” he said.

I just want the medicine to help stop the symptoms of my RLS. There is nothing in my life I want to escape from. I am working on embracing things, not escaping from them. I like my wits about me, and hate the thought of leaving them defiled on some altar to chemicals which rob and steal. I am so thankful for that. I also mourn for my friends who are chained to this altar. They have made a bad bargain. I wish I knew how to help them and mourn my inability to do so.

It seems there is much to mourn amid the much to be thankful for. That’s the way life is. We mourn our losses; we celebrate our victories; we keep moving towards more mourning and celebration. I think I’ll celebrate victory now and leave the mourning behind me, having already had my share for the day and a good night’s sleep last night. As I sit here, looking at the sugar cube I am preparing to drop into my cup of coffee, I celebrate the medicine I know will be in it one day and refuse to mourn the fact that there is no medicine in it now, just a sweetness that makes this cup of coffee delightful.

Oops! I had filled the cup too full. The sugar cube made my cup overflow!

How about that!

A special thanks to Hemosapien for more than one special favor! As Ed Dye would have said of him had he known him, “He’s a good boy!”

I wish Ed could have had Hemopsapien treating him instead of the VA, which I think neglected him to the point of killing him, telling him that the pain in his back was just because of arthritis. This was just a month before they finally discovered that cancer had invaded his lungs and spine, nearly destroying two of his thoracic vertebrae. He passed away from his cancer within a month of their discovery that his pain was not caused by arthritis. Hemosapien, Mainmost and Gooday would have seen this right away. Dr. Assinineiranian-prahbupthi Mustafamediocreislandmedschoolmiscreant at the VA? He just told Ed to take some Tylenol to relieve the pain.

I’d like to turn Hemosapien, Gooday and Mainmost loose on those crappy VA doctors with a fresh batch of hickory sticks—not too big, but just big enough so that they won’t break with a good swat.

I had a wonderful weekend. Great friends, great food, great music, delightful weather, grandbabies, etc!

11/1/09 We Win, We Lose; Thankful Either Way

Last weekend, I had the best time. Raymond Huffmaster and I have been trying to capture the remarkable musicianship of our friend Avil Linton. Avil is a stellar musician who has been a tremendous influence on so many other musicians, some of them Grammy winners, that we felt it was urgent to capture him on audio and video while we had the means to do so—Avil, himself, being the most important variable in that equation. I've got my recording studio and some video cameras and all the accoutrements that go along with it, but it would be hard to capture Avil without Avil.

He is a humble man, and we were hard pressed to get him to go along with doing this, but he reluctantly agreed. We called in his friend and ours Larry Perkins to come down from Nashville and help. While we did not produce anything that is like a record to be released, we did manage to capture the essence of Avil. I am going to post some of the videos on YouTube shortly and will keep you readers posted so you can see this remarkable man. He'll read this and call me and tell me that I should not have written such things about him, that he was rusty, that he can't play anymore, that all this fuss should not have been made over him. I know the phone will ring as soon as his wife Judy shows this to him. She's the computer person, and Avil just looks at things she finds for him.

He and Raymond encouraged me when I was a young player. They taught me so much and indulged me when I only knew a couple of songs to play, which I would break out into like Elvis in one of his movies the minute the action seemed to lag. They must have listened to "My Walking Shoes Don't Fit Me Anymore" until they were absolutely sick of it. They would smile when I'd sing it and play right along, so I thought they liked to hear me do it; but I'm certain they didn't like to hear it 25 times in a single evening's worth of picking. Those were forced smiles, but they were encouraging. I am forever grateful for them. So many people have an impact on our lives. We have them for a while, then we lose them, but my, oh my, we are thankful for having had them.

Sometime during the course of last Sunday evening, we had about run out of steam. Avil had developed blisters on his fingertips (we worked him pretty hard!) and was just about done. We were beginning to think about something to eat, and just visiting for a while, when Raymond asked me to play Jimmie Rodgers "Free From the Chain Gang Now."

This song was written by a Tin-Pan Alley songwriting duo named Herscher and Klein. Herscher and Klein no doubt kept Kosher, as we were unable to do as we somewhat later sat down to some country style ribs that I had cooked on my remarkable grill earlier I got lots of compliments on them. (Raymond brought the ribs and I cooked them!) I hope Herscher and Klein did not mind us eating pork so soon after having their song issue from my gentile mouth. I suppose they didn't mind since we all agreed that Herscher and Klein had written perhaps and arguably, the best country music song ever written.

Jimmie recorded this song late in his career when he was already selling millions of records. I suppose, like today, the artist selling millions of records gets first shot at all the good songs. I'm glad Ol' Jimmie got a shot at this one and decided to sing it. It is, without fail, one of my favorite songs. Thanks, Mr. Herscher. Thanks, Mr. Klein. **Shalom Aleichem** to you! And thank you, Jimmie. Your illness and looming departure from this earth gave poignancy to this song I do not hear in any of your other songs.

"Jimmie," I asked to the specter appearing in front of me, perhaps a leftover from the days I wrote about earlier, "what led you to do this song?"

"Well, Ol' Pal, I was reaching the end of the line from that ol' TB when one of those New York people brought this song to me. It ain't about dying, but it sure is about livin', so I decided to record it. It never sold like my "Blue Yodel" songs, but it did all right. After I passed on, it provided some royalties to my family," he said.

"Were you ever on a chain gang?" I asked.

"Naw, never on a chain gang, but I was in jail a time or two," he said. "I had some rough and rowdy ways about me, but that ol' TB took the starch right out of my sails. I wound up having to move to Texas so I could breathe. They said that dry air would help me, but I was beyond help, I think."

"Seems so," I said. "Well I hate the fact that you had to move to Texas. They lay some sort of faux claim to you and actually like to brag that you are from there. You know how Texans like to brag."

"Boy, do I!" he said. "But they were nice to me, those Texans; a gracious bunch they are when you get to know them. And they sure can make a mean brisket!"

"Amen!" I said.

"So you went to Texas for medical reasons?" I asked.

"Yes, but they couldn't help me there."

"You know, I go to the Big-As-Texas Cancer Center in Houston for treatment of my disease. It's like TB in the way that it slowly chokes the life out of you. In that way, we have much in common: Texas medicine and slow-death diseases."

"That's what I heard," he said.

"How could you have possibly have heard about me?" I asked.

"My sister-in-law Elsie McWilliams and my first cousin Hortense Harvey told me all about you. We have them in common, too, you know."

I was shocked that Jimmie Rodgers knew anything about me.

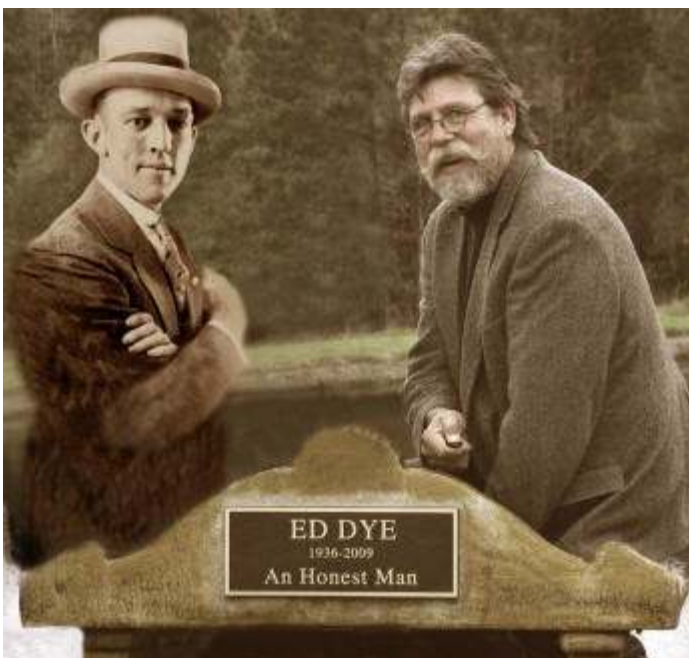
"They said that they tried and tried to get you to play some of my songs, but you never would. They were terribly disappointed about that, but now, you've come around and we're all pleased about that up here. You need to work on your yodel, though. It's a little weak, I think!"

"Boy, I'll say. There's no way I could ever yodel like you, but I do the best I can. A yodel can go as bad as potato salad left out on a July picnic table if you don't watch it."

"I've had a few go bad, too, in my day," he said. "But they're all right on the mark now. Never miss one!"

"I bet not," I said, adding, "I sure enjoyed this conversation."

"We'll get to have more conversations soon enough."



"Do you mind if I take our photo while we're sitting on the ED DYE MEMORIAL BENCH?" I asked.

"Why, no. Ed was a fine entertainer. He was very fond of my music. He told me about the time that you and he spent a rainy Saturday and listened to every single one of the songs I recorded. Ed has since heard a few that I never was able to get recorded. Elsie and I have been working on some new material, and I like the way Ed is puttin' that ol' dobro in there!"

"I'll bet he's enjoying himself!" I said.

"Say, that's a fancy camera there," he said.

"Nikon D90," I replied. "I just set it up and push this remote control button here in my

right hand, and we'll have us a nice photo."

"Do tell? What will they think of next?" he said, quizzically.

I took the photo and could see that it was time for him to go. "Say hello to Miss Elsie and Miss Harvey for me, and Ed, too, if you don't mind!"

"Will do," he said and, as he dematerialized right in front of my eyes, added, "Heh-heh! Hang in there Ol' Podner, and keep on singing my songs. They were good ones, you know."

They were good ones. They were good ones. I kept thinking after he was gone. Dang right, they were good ones. He still influences people today. I'm not the only one.

Free From the Chain Gang Now? Here's the lyrics.

*I got rid of the shackles that bound me
And the guards who were always around me
Like a bird in the trees I have won my liberty
And I'm free from the chain gang now.*

*Long ago I was known and respected
Then one day I was falsely suspected*

*They put me in chains working out in the rain
But I'm free from the chain gang now.*

(Then the Yodel!)

*My mother's poor heart was broken
'Cause she knew that an untruth was spoken
There were tears on the mail that she sent me in jail
But I'm free from the chain gang now.*

*And all the years that I spent with a number
Were just years that I spent without slumber
After long years of shame I have won back my name
And I'm free from the chain gang now.*

(More yodel!)

*Now I'm going back home to another
She's my sweetheart who's waiting with mother
And I'll dry all the tears they've been shedding for years
'Cause I'm free from the chain gang now.*

(Last yodel and out!)

I sang this song with Raymond, Avil, Larry and Lyle, had the second yodel go bad but recovered after spitting it out like some of that bad potato salad. They all liked it. I warned them before I started that the studio room was a little small for the yodel, and that there was no halfway to yodel. It is an all-or-nothing venture, like a bet placed on a hard number on a craps table; you either win or lose—no partial victory.

"Let 'er fly," said Larry.

So I let 'er fly!

When I was done Avil said, "I'd tell you that I liked that, but I'm afraid that you'd think I meant it." Always picking, asking, "What happened on that second yodel?"

"She turned bad on me about as quick as a horse that threw a shoe off a sore foot."

"That can happen!" he said softly, letting me off the hook, apparently in reflection of a few musical ventures having gone bad on him, too.

"Free From the Chain Gang Now" is a song that is at once sad and happy. It simultaneously bemoans loss and celebrates recovery. It is joyful and mournful at the same time. What an achievement for Herscher and Klein as songwriters. Did they craft this song out of their own cleverness, or did it download itself to them from the ether, as Bob Dylan declared on how he gets many of his songs? I know that it is true, that you can tune your personal receiver to a frequency that has the song playing on it. You can labor for hours turning that imaginary dial; then suddenly, there is a song just waiting to be written down.

I'm always writing stuff that leaves the new CLL_BLOG reader wondering, "What in the world does that have to do with him and leukemia?" If you've been a reader for a while, you know my standard answer.

Everything.

You get cancer; you mourn what you lost. Then, if you are going to have a meaningful life thereafter, you cannot continue in mourning; you must move on to being thankful for what it is that you HAVE. Jimmie Rodgers mourned for the time he lost in "Free From the Chain Gang," but he was thankful for what he had left. Without being bitter about his loss, he moved on towards the two wonderful women he had waiting for him, his sweetheart and his mother.

I will post the Bad Yodel Number 1 version I sang last Sunday right here in a couple of days. I forgot to bring the file with me. You can listen to it, flaws and all. That's how others see our lives, anyway, flaws and all. I laugh at myself. I may as well, when you hear the song, you'll hear everyone laugh at it.

I am also posting Jimmie Rodgers' original [here](#). It belongs to a publisher that I hope will not mind if I use it here for a short time. They may make me take it down. If they do, that's OK. I am borrowing it for just a little while. Maybe you can hear the pain, loss, and redemption that Jimmie communicated in this song while he was speeding to his own death from Tuberculosis. Maybe it will make you want to rush out and buy a Jimmie Rodgers CD, thus rewarding the publisher for my having put the song on here. It can't hurt.

You can watch and hear me and the Jang-A-Lang band do it in three-part harmony, no bad yodel , below.

Tomorrow, I am off to Hemosapien for that bone-marrow biopsy. Debbie says she forbids me to carry my pistol. Then Wednesday, Thursday and Friday will see me with "Them Ol' Chemo Blues!" Gene Bush is coming down from Nashville to spend the week with me and carry me to my chemo treatments. You see? You see how fortunate I am? I've got a friend who will come all the way to Porterville from Nashville to be with me for a week and carry me to my treatments. Think about that for a while.

I sure am thankful. Thankful for old friends, new friends, old friends I rediscovered on FaceBook (what a wonderful medium!), family, family I rediscovered on FaceBook, and thankful for the Book of Job. I keep rereading it. It is stuck on me like a fly-trap dropped from a rotten string in the barn, curled all about my hair (which I still have and am thankful for).

Job is worthy of a lifetime of study. One could never understand all of its lessons, but one can sure grow up while trying!

11/3/09 The Cat Will Be Skint!!

Today I went for my Chemotherapy Mid-Course Bone-marrow biopsy. My friend Gene went with me. I was not looking forward to it, but it must be done. Hemosapien and I discussed this prior to starting. I asked him, in his estimate, what the results would say when they came back. He was guarded in his comments.

"You've studied this and you know the numbers," he said. "But the biopsy will reveal what it will reveal."

I nodded my head and threw numbers back at him. "On the first chemotherapy, about 90% of the people respond. We know that I am in the 90% because of my blood counts have shown a dramatic improvement."

"That's right," he said.

"About 60% of the first timers have a complete response the first time, which means there is no measurable residual disease left in their body," I said, spouting off numbers like we were TWO doctors discussing a patient that was not me.

"If I were to be completely responsive, that does not mean that there is no disease left in my body," I continued, "just that it is reduced to the point that in a sample, given the sensitivity of the measuring tools we have available to us, it simply cannot be detected. That's a far cry from not having the disease, but far better than having it in measurable strength."

"Yep!" he said, me doing all the talking and he preferring to wait for the biopsy results.

I was not ready to shut up yet, perhaps wanting to put the biopsy off as long as possible, and continued with a question. "So if I am completely responsive, what does that give me?"

"You know those numbers, too," he said.

"Given the fact that I am unmutated IgVH and Zap-70 positive, if I am lucky, I'll be disease free for a couple of years, building up to needing retreatment in 4 to 5 years," I said.

"Yep!" he said, making me think that he was really from New England and not South Mississippi.

"Can you tell me how to get to the highway?" I asked the Vermont dairy farmer.

"Yep," he said, offering nothing else.

"Well then, will you tell me?"

"Yep," he said gazing off in the distance.

"Well, how, pray tell, do I get there?" I asked in exasperation.

"From here?" he asked.

"Yes, please, from here!"

"Turn right by where the old milk plant used to be," he said, pointing East, grudgingly, like those eleven words were a very expensive waste on one with an accent like mine—he saying no more, and me wondering just how I was going to determine where the old milk plant used to be.

Hemosapien decided that he needed to spend a few words, but he was not going to tell me anything I didn't already know until he was sure what the biopsy said.

"When all these studies were done, we didn't know about ZAP-70 and IgVH mutations and their significance to disease progression, and the lack of those significant variables make the numbers somewhat unreliable," he said, adding, "But don't be disheartened if this three-month, mid-course biopsy doesn't show you being completely responsive. That's what we hope to achieve with the last three treatments."

I then showed him a copy of my bill and the detailed invoice I had already gotten the nice ladies at the front office to print out for me. I pointed to the procedure codes on the bill, telling him that I needed some sort of reference to determine what these meant, so that I could look at what they charged for each procedure, how much my insurance paid them for each procedure, what the PPO discount was for each procedure, thus learning my NET cost for each procedure. I think he thought that I was trying to determine what their cost and margin of profit was. He was reluctant to offer me any help.

"The ladies at the front office do not want to give me this information," I said.

"Neither do I," replied Hemosapien.

"But it would be so easy for you to help me. They work for you, you go up there and tell them, 'get him the procedure code schedule' and they, working for you, will do it. It's just that simple."

"Perhaps you should Google and see if you can find this information on your own."

"I am a businessman, a capitalist, and respect the fact that you HAVE to have a margin of profit on your sales, or you cannot pay the rent, yourselves, all these nice nurses, phlebotomists and lab technicians, all your significant malpractice insurance premiums, and your insurance and business office people. I understand that. What I am trying to determine is what all this is actually costing ME. What it costs YOU is irrelevant to me. What you charge me for it, though, is relevant, and I have the right for that information in some manner other than unspecified charges and credits, or charges and credits referenced to some code that I do not know what it is."

"I don't want to be involved in this. I have other duties which are far more important to me, such as your health care. The business end is not what I focus on. We have other people who work here who do that"

Persisting I said, "And they work for you. One word from you and they will get me that information."

He reluctantly agreed to look in on that, but encouraged me to acquire this code information on my own.

We then got on to the business at hand with the biopsy.



Nurse Rona was to be his assistant today. I gave my cell phone to Gene and asked him to take photos of the biopsy tools. Shown to the left is the sterile package of implements of torture and pain, which would be shortly opened and used in a medieval manner on my body. I was ready, though. Throughout our previous conversation, I have been very verbose, just talking away. I told Hemosapien that I had taken two of the valiums he had prescribed for my sleeping to assist me during the biopsy. He laughed and said that he could tell.

He then got to work, sterilizing the area of my hip from which he was to take his bone marrow core. Gene later commented that he did all of this with great precision. One of the tools he used, the large one Hemosapien is pointing to in the picture, is called a "gemshidi." This is pronounced "jim-shiddy." What a perfect name. I told Hemosapien just to think what fun I was going to have on my blog with that name.

"Jim-Shitty! Jim-Shitty!" I said, adding, "'Shitty' certainly is the right word."

"A shitty instrument for shitty treatment at the hands of doctors who love to use shitty instruments to torture their patients, instruments invented by Jim, the apprentice of the Marquis-de-Sade, shitty person that he was," I thought to myself, having already used the word shitty in front of nice Nurse Rona as much as I thought I could get away with. I apologized and she said she had heard plenty worse during a biopsy.



"It's payback time for some of the things you have written about me," Hemosapien said with a twisted sort of grin, one I had never seen before. I was starting to sweat bullets, thinking of every time I had inserted words into his mouth on my blog, words which sometimes were mine and not actually his, me having already explained to you readers that this is MY blog, and the truth is in here somewhere, but sometimes occluded by my jaded and cynical perception. Oh how I worried about that now! He could certainly make this more painful than it had to be,

and it had to be painful, even excruciating, but it did not have to be tortuous. He could certainly shrug his shoulders and make it so. Those sweat bullets were getting bigger. Perhaps I had taken the valium too soon and it was wearing off.



"You are too professional a physician for any personal, petty vendettas," I said to his ego more than to him. To my own ear, though, more than to him, I was hoping that this bit of flattery and appeal to his professionalism would yield at least a small dividend. I'm not sure that that worked, but I am sure of this: This bone-marrow biopsy was not at all like the first one. While it was significantly unpleasant and intense, it was just significantly unpleasant and intense. It was not intensely painful. I had a few jolts of pain, but no where near like the first one. I was still thinking that the worst part was to come when Hemosapien announced, "All done now!"

"You're kidding!" I said.

"Nope. All finished," he replied.

"I simply cannot believe that you are leveling with me. There's got to be more!"

"Nope! All done!"

Was it the valium I took? I don't think so, though it didn't hurt.

"In the year it's been since I had my first biopsy, you've had much more practice doing these," I said to Hemosapien. "Your technique has improved considerably. There is absolutely no comparison between this one and the first one."

"Well, we do them all the time," he said.

"By the next time I need one, you'll be so good at it, you'll be able to do it via e-mail or mobile upload," I said, him laughing at the suggestion.

"I salute you. My hip salutes you. Future patients will stand and salute you," I foresaw.

He just laughed and started putting things away, adding, "Your rear is going to be pretty sore, though. You might want to be careful how you sit down."

And he is right. It's as sore as a thumbnail torn to the quick, with a blow from a dead-hammer thrown in for good measure, but compared to the previous biopsy . . .?

I had already told myself that old women and children get these and endure it. Why should I make a big deal of it? Why should I whine about it? It was a thing that was required, and a thing to be endured, so shut up and get on with it. Manly was the word that came to mind.

Perhaps that was why it seemed less painful. Perhaps it was the 20mg Valium. Perhaps it was because my buddy Gene was there with me. Perhaps it was Hemosapien's more practiced and experienced technique. Maybe the first one was a fluke. Maybe this one was an aberration. Maybe the next one will be blindingly painful. Maybe the leukemia will kill me before I have to have another one. Maybe a complication of the leukemia will kill me before I have to have another one. Maybe I'll get H1N1. Maybe the sky is falling. Maybe all of these things. Maybe none of these things.

"Do you mind if I take your photo to put on my blog?" I asked Hemosapien.

"No," he said, "I won't mind."

"I'll bring my real camera for that instead of this cell phone. Come see me tomorrow while I'm getting my Rituxan. You know I'll be there all day," I said.

"OK!" he said back, with the nicest smile.

He then handed me the standard procedure sheet which I was to turn in to the ladies at the front desk, so they could do their billing and schedule the appointment for the chemo the next day. I looked at it. I looked at it again. I began to study it carefully. There, on one sheet of paper, in my hand, were all the procedures and procedure codes used by Hemosapien's clinic. This is exactly what I had asked for, which everyone seemed reluctant to provide to me. Hemosapien had told me to try to find this information on my own, and on my own I found it, just by being observant to the piece of paper that was in my hand. They had handed me one of these dozens of times before, but I never really needed the information on them until now.

Everyone at that clinic is helpful. They do their very best to accommodate the patients and represent a real value in quality healthcare as far as I have been able to determine. Meridian, Mississippi, is extremely fortunate to have Hemosapien, his colleagues, and the facilities they use to practice their medicine. They save lives every day. Of course, eventually all of us patients DIE, but it's their job to see that we don't die from our CANCER. That is not always possible because it is OUR cancer, not THEIRS. It is our bodies running amok; they just do their best-to-their-human-capability job to help us. Sometimes they win; sometimes they lose. Their losses do not leave them unaffected since physicians are not islands entire of themselves, but pieces of the continent, parts of the main. They know that the bell tolls for them. (See John Donne, previously cited.)

Since everyone there is so helpful, I asked the first nice, helpful person coming down the hall if there was a copier nearby. The answer was yes.

"Can you make a copy of this for me?" I asked.

"Sure!"

Now in my hand were two copies of the information I needed. I turned in the original to the lady at the front desk who will use it for the intended purpose at their facility. I folded the copy and stuck it in my pocket. Hemosapien had provided the information I needed after all.

There is more than one way to skin a cat, and rest assured, when persistence and determination are met with spits, claws, and even fangs, the cat will be skint! If not one way, then certainly another.

"Could you not clearly see that the cat was fore-ordained to be skinned?" chuckled Calvin, springing up out of nowhere as Gene was driving us back to my house.

"Shut up and go away," I said to him.

"Were you talking to me?" Gene asked incredulously.

"No! Sorry, Gene. I was just thinking of what I needed to tell a worrisome old friend."

11/5/09 Round-4 Day-1

Geno carried me down to Hemosapien's clinic yesterday for me to begin Round 4 of the Chemo. It was the day I was to get my Rituximab, a slow, all day process, though it went well. I really appreciated having my friend with me and we talked like schoolgirls. I had asked Hemosapien on Tuesday, before the biopsy, if Geno and I could bring a couple of guitars and entertain the patients in the chemo room. He seemed to like the idea, said that would be a first. The nurses say different, though, that one time previous, someone brought a guitar

and played a few tunes. We don't want to inflict ourselves on very ill people, but I don't think a couple of songs will bother anyone, particularly if it is not very crowded.



We decided that Wednesday would not be the best day since we would be here all day and might be tempted to play longer than we should, so today is the day. Before we left yesterday evening, Nurse Juanita said that everyone had been told, and were looking forward to it, and they were going to take pictures. I will get someone to use my camera, and we'll have photos of our big gig in the chemo ward.



I asked Nurse J to stop long enough for me to get her photo, shown at left. I managed to get this good one while she was telling Gene that I was a model patient and minded her very well. As I told the reader before, I would be as "skint" as the cat in the previous chapter if my wife thought I was out of line with Nurse J. She's got my vote. So does Nurse Juanita.

I did not have any reactions to the Rituximab, which is always good. I then got my anti-nausea medicine and then the Cyclophosphamide (Cytoxan) and Fludarabine (Fludara). It does not take nearly so long to get them. I also got a big does of steroids, which I despise, but must have. I complained about the steroids, and Nurse Juanita called

Hemosapien to ask if I could do without them this time. I think that the conversation went like this:

"Dr. Hemosapien, is it possible to skip Mr. Sharp's Decadron with this chemo round? He is really complaining about how the steroids affect him?" might have said Nurse Juanita.

"Well, Mr. Sharp should be clearly informed if we give him the Rituximab without giving him the steroids, his possibly sudden and rapid death may prevent any future unpleasant steroid side-effects, and any complaints that he might have about them, but that would be a moot point, wouldn't it?" might have replied Hemosapien.

Nurse Juanita came back and actually said, "There is no way he'll let me give you this without giving you the steroids first."

I sighed and submitted.

Apparently the steroids help to prevent the live mouse antibodies from which the rituximab is synthesized from causing severe anaphylactic shock type reactions in my own body. The thing about the steroids is that they give you a false sense of feeling good. You have energy, no joint or muscular pains; really, you feel pretty good; then they let you down, like a reverse hangover. As they leave your system, you feel worse and worse. Whatever normal aches and pains you did not feel while under their influence were simply postponed to all return at once, and whatever faux energy provided by the steroids was merely borrowed from future reserves, which demand repayment as soon as the steroids are down to a level where they can no longer resist the body's energy bill collector. Then, you feel WRETCH-ED. There is no way around it; it must simply be endured.

Hemosapien e-mailed me and said that a lab in Nashville that they also use is able to do the flow cytometry on my labs. The normal lab that they use is not in my PPO network. He said if I could check within the next hour or so, he could send the slides to the lab in Nashville if I could confirm to him that Nashville was in my network. There I am hooked up to chemo tubes: How could I determine that in the next hour or so? By the magic of the Blackberry I was holding in my hand. I googled "PPOPlus +US Labs" and the search immediately turned up "US Labs, Brentwood, Tennessee," as a participant in my network. I was able to e-mail Hemosapien back in just a few minutes and tell him to send those slides to Nashville! He was being very helpful to me.

Not only that, I was copied on e-mails between Hemosapien and Nurse Susan at BATCC. The summation of their exchanges went like this: Both Hemosapien and Gooday really wanted the actual slides of my bone marrow, but BATCC was willing to receive the REPORTS of the lab work only in order to save me some money, since both Hemosapien's lab and BATCC's lab would have to charge their fees for this lab work and pathologists interpretation. There was no need for me to have to pay for this twice. Hemosapien could just send BATCC the report of the lab work he had done.

I am truly thankful for this effort made on my behalf by people who took time out of their busy schedules to assist me in this manner. To all my health-care providers who have always done things behind the scenes for my benefit, many of which I am aware, and I'm certain many that I don't even have a clue about, here is a great big ol', unmitigated, unabashed, gushing "Thank you!" I am humbled by your service, your levels of professionalism, your care, and your patience with me which continues in spite of me being so persistently demanding, and occasionally downright obstreperous.

It's off today for Round-4 Day-2. It's more of that delicious cyclophosphamide and fludarabine. The cyclophosphamide leaves a taste in your mouth like you just licked a rusty old iron skillet. The fludarabine seems innocuous enough, but without the Kytril (anti-nausea medicine) they tell me I would like both of them even less. Funny though, the chemotherapy is not about what I like, the chemotherapy is about what the cancer DOESN'T like, and the cancer DOESN'T like rituximab, cyclophosphamide and fludarabine. What I like is irrelevant, unless my likes are confined to the focus and welcome reception of the things that the cancer doesn't like, despite the side-effects.

I think I'll just shut-up now and take what's coming to me, a particularly rare and newsworthy occurrence.

Someone should alert the media.

11/30/09 No Catharsis Necessary

I extend my sincere apologies to all you readers. I have neglected you, shamefully so. I have stated before that the writing of this blog has been cathartic for me, but no catharsis has been necessary. Still, there is much to report.

First: Geno and I put on concerts two days in a row at the chemo center: Thursday, November 5, and Friday, November 6. Everyone was entertained! Not a single complaint. We were always sure to be in tune and in time, two of the most basic elements of music. There were lots of smiles all around. In fact, we were able to rehearse a song that we later did that Friday night on The Sucarnochee Revue. Thanks to Hemosapien, his colleagues and staff, for letting us use their chemo room as a rehearsal hall.

Later on Friday, after the final drops of cyclophosphamide, fludarabine, kytril, and decadron entered my veins I got this welcome e-mail from Hemosapien:

*flow cytometry and marrow review look good (no detectable clI).
Congratulations. will forward to BATCC (reports only and not slides-
see email Nurse Susan 11/3). sorry about the photo.*

What good news to be sent in such a short e-mail! What good news to be sent in such a small e-mail! What good news to be sent in such a tiny e-mail! What good news to be sent in such a teeny-weenie e-mail! What good news to be sent in such a teeniney e-mail! What good news to be sent in such a microscopic e-mail! What good news to be sent in such a taciturn e-mail! What good news to be sent in such a disloquacious e-mail! What good news to be sent in such an itty-bitty e-mail! What good news to be sent in such a lilliputian e-mail! What good news to be sent in such a quarkish e-mail! What good news to be sent in such a scant e-mail! What good news to be sent in such a miniscule e-mail!

I think I'll say it one more time.

What good news to be sent in such a welcome e-mail!

Hemosapien uses words sparingly, or at least, he does so around me. It could be that I am somewhat intimidating, but I don't think so; he has long since learned me pretty well. He just chooses his words carefully and does not seem to want to waste a single one. What good news to be sent in such a terse e-mail! Hemosapien's exuberance actually shows through and through . . . notice the capital "C" in congratulations!

Since I've received that news?

With the blessings of Hemosapien and Gooday and the fine folks at BATCC, I was able to postpone chemo round number 5 until after January 1, 2010. At this point, I will report for chemo round five on January 6, 2010, then a round in February, then back off to Houston and BATCC in March for a final biopsy and checkout as part of their research protocol, which is not diminished or damaged by the postponement of the treatment for one month. This stops chemo round 5, which would have put me over my annual insurance cap had it occurred in December, from coming straight, dead-head out of my pocket! I am doubly blessed.

Someone wise once said, "The harder I work, the luckier I seem to be!" Is all of this good fortune because of my hard work? Because of my sincere and stellar prayers, influencing the Almighty with their wit, power and precision? That notion is ludicrous and laughable! I did work hard to manage my insurance resources. I did send sincere and mighty prayers to the highest of the heavens, which I know were heard and answered.

Naw! It was not that. It was YOUR prayers. YOUR positive thoughts. Friends like Geno who came all the way from Nashville to spend the week with me and carry me to my chemo treatments. Friends like my bride, my mother, my daughter, my son, my brother, my step-father, my step-mother, my daddy, my step-sisters, my cousins, my friends, my church family, my fans . . . my readers . . . YOU! All throughout this, I have been borne on this surge of prayer and energy, which has come from outside of myself. I acknowledge it and am truly thankful for it.

"But was it not fated to be so?" asks Calvin, who, formerly asleep, was awakened by the smell of free-will weakness and was now on the attack.

"You know, John, it might be so. I can't argue with you about it. You are far too clever for a direct intellectual assault. I can't yield, neither can I let go," I replied. "But don't take that admission as my acceptance, either."

"Nay, thou art not as resourceless as thou takest thyself," said Calvin.

"Why, thank you!" I said, so charmed by his flattery that I failed to notice that this French theologian, who later took up residence in Switzerland, was speaking to me in perfect King James English, without the slightest hint of an accent. Amazed by this, I asked, "What's up with the English accent?"

"Funny you should just now notice it. I've been using it on you for quite some time. I've been practicing it for years, but seldom get to use it."

"Why use it now?"

"You're the only one who speaks English who seems to want to engage in theological discourse with me."

"Well, I haven't WANTED to. I've sort of been forced into it," I said. "Now you've dropped the King James and are just speaking to me in regular, modern English."

"I save King James English for important theological proclamations! In the meantime, I'll take my victories wherever they present themselves," he said. "Would you prefer we speak in French? Latin? Greek? German? Hebrew?"

"No! King James English doth serve us both well!"

"You know, one of my famous quotes is 'Seeing that a Pilot steers the ship in which we sail, who will never allow us to perish even in the midst of shipwrecks, there is no reason why our minds should be overwhelmed with fear and overcome with weariness,'" Calvin said, somewhat smugly.

"You said that?" I asked.

"I did, and I meant it then, even more so now!"

"Thou art full of surprises, aren't thou?"

"Just slightly more so than thou!"

"There's a hand on the tiller that's steering my ship, that's for sure . . . sometimes it is my own hand, and it seems so foggy, and the crash of waves on rocky shoals seem so near," I said, lapsing into a dream-like state, hearing the sound of those waves on the rocks, feeling the salt spray on my face, the ship reeling underfoot, me struggling to hold the wheel straight and keep her on the wind.

"And most times, there are hands that thou canst not see, nor canst thou feel, but they art present, nevertheless. Sure and certain art they when thou art in the midst of faltering," he said, vanishing, leaving me to chew on that and anxiously await his return, his anticipated return, but always at the unexpected moment. I called for him, but he was gone!

So readers, I apologize for my lack of bloggishness. Here you go. There's more to come, particularly revelations about the cost of treatment since I have enough information to share this intelligently with you. In the meantime, I have been getting on with living and, more and more, feeling like my old, former self . . . and that is a good thing, because my old-former-self felt just fine.

Thank you for your support. Let me hear from you!

Hemosapien still owes me a photograph! Just wait until January! I'll go in armed with a guitar AND a camera!!

12/2/09 Cancer Guilt

You get cancer; you feel guilty. You walk into the oncology center and see others with cancer worse than yours; you feel guilty. You respond well to your chemotherapy when others do not; you feel guilty. You get good reports while simultaneously others are receiving the worst news; you feel guilty. Cancer just makes you feel guilty.

They say this is a typical response. **They** say not to worry about it. **They** say to reject it. **They** have all the answers. **They** always have the best words for the worst occasions. Their publishers think their words offer hope and healing. Their publishers also believe that **They** make their bank accounts larger. **They** write books and turn them out by the thousands. **They** write books with fancy, catchy, modern names. **They** sell millions of these books to millions of people who can't tell you who Marcus Aurelius was or find Borneo on a globe. **They** have never sold me a single one. **They** do not seem to speak to me though **They** speak to millions from the forum allowed them on Oprah! and other outlets through the power of TV. **They** cannot repackage human truth, clothe it in some modern trimmings, infused with all the latest metaphors and metaphysical religious-but-not-religious-pseudo-pop-psychology, and say anything new. While **They** may have a glimpse of the truth, the glimpse **They** have is only new to themselves, if then. A really wise man once said, "There is nothing new under the sun." I think he was right.

Am I right? Maybe, maybe not, perhaps not, probably not, but I sure know who Marcus Aurelius was and can find Borneo on the globe. Have I read modern pop-psychology books? No, not yet. Am I going to? Probably not. There are too many classic works I want to read that I have not yet started to waste time on something I think must be every bit as good as one of TV's new 30 minute sit-coms or reality shows. Have I seen any of them? No. How can I comment on things I have not read or shows that I have not seen or even music that I have not listened to? It's easy to comment on things one knows nothing about. People do it all the time.

So there!

I still feel guilty but will stop it any day now. I do know this: I am quick to talk to others with any kind of cancer and have learned that if I'll just simply be quiet and listen, they'll tell me all about their disease, their struggles with it, how they're coping, and they'll have an eager listener. Sometimes their stories are hard to hear. Perhaps that is what makes me feel guilty. If so, then I will continue to feel that way.

The times I feel less guilty are those times I remind myself of what I've already written, when at Big-as-Texas Cancer Center I saw a masked woman coming towards me down the hall and looked deep into her eyes and saw myself. I saw myself coming and going. When we realize that we are those other people, it must make our guilt seem less. It must give us some relief. It does and yet it doesn't. The paradox of being thankful and simultaneously feeling guilty is very peculiar. It is what it is. Clever words will not make it seem less, any more than clever words can give someone their life back.

I did not sleep at all last night. My tiredness makes me cynical, or rather, my tiredness brings my cynicism out of the cage I normally keep it in. I occasionally let it out on purpose. Occasionally it escapes and is hard to round up and get back in the cage. It naturally prefers

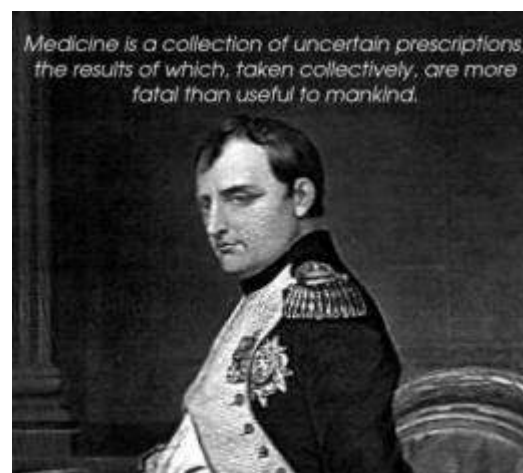
the wide open spaces and the chance for human encounter so it can offer its comment during conversation, but I stay after it until it is rounded up and safely stowed away. When I let it out, I seem to be able to control it, but when it escapes, it seems to have a will of its own and is unruly, unmanageable, and belligerently obstreperous.

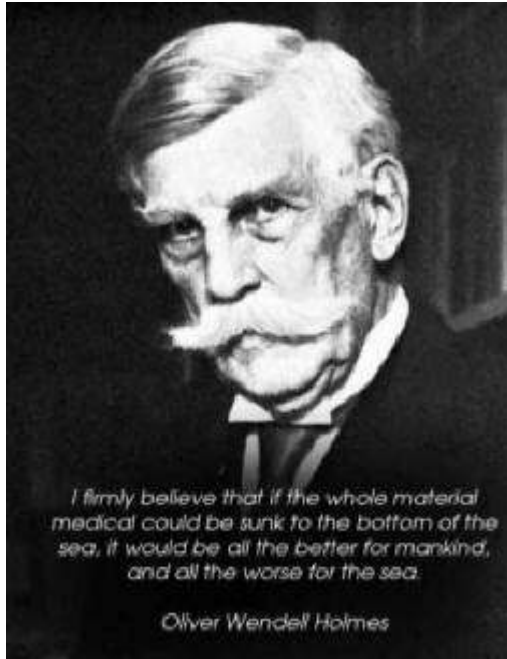
Below are what some OTHERS have said about medicine. I did not say this, nor did I put any words in their mouths—as I have been frequently known to do. This time I'm on the level. I do not feel this way about Hemosapien or Gooday, perhaps because things are going well right now. I may feel different later, when circumstances have presented themselves in an unfavorable manner.



Now THAT is funny!!

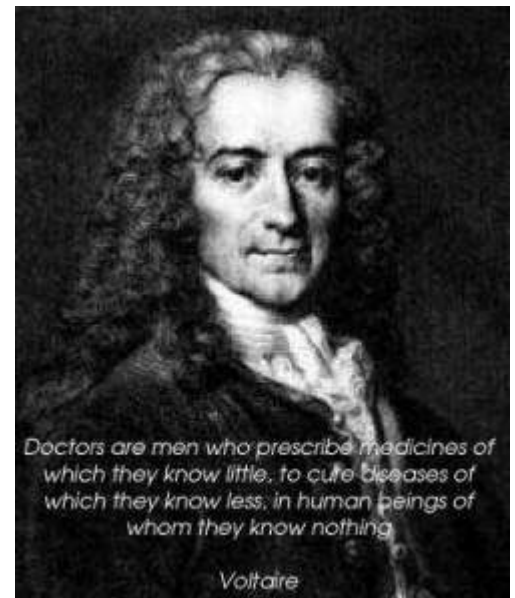
I did not think I need to put his name with his picture. If you do not know who he is, STOP WATCHING TV and TURN YOUR COMPUTER OFF, immediately! Go and get a history book to read, for goodness sake!





Now there's a moustache I like!!!

Along with Mark Twain, my all-time favorite writer!



None of these witty remarks are applicable today because of the miracles of MODERN medicine!

12/10/09 Stillness

"All men's miseries derive from not being able to sit in a quiet room alone."

Blaise Pascal



This runs so deep. What a thinker, that Pascal!

We run from ourselves, from diversion to diversion, afraid to be alone with ourselves for a single minute. Are we afraid of boredom? Are we afraid of contemplation? Are we afraid of ourselves and what we face without those diversions? Are we ultimately afraid to be alone with ourselves because in the stillness, we hear that still small voice? Do we prefer the whirlwind? Do we prefer the firestorm? Does the sound of that still, small voice annoy us? Does it frighten us? Does it speak to us when we look in the mirror? What does it tell us then? Does that voice condemn us? Is it our own voice? Is it the voice of God? If it is condemnation we hear, what is it in us that it is condemning? Why do we have it? Why do we tolerate it? Why can't we get rid of it? Why does it hurt us so? What is it in us that

makes us cling to the things that we would rather shed like a snake sheds its old skin? Why? Why? and Why not?

Ed Dye* was the first person in whom I recognized the ability to sit absolutely still, all alone, lost in his own thoughts. There were others, earlier, but I did not recognize them then. Sometimes when Ed was a guest at Timberview Lodge, I would watch him from my house as he sat on the slope of the hill, facing the West as the sun went down. He would just sit there. He would sit and then sit longer. He sat as the sunlight shifted wavelength from white, to ochre, and finally to red—long shadows falling behind him and long shadows of the white oak trees reaching towards him, reaching, reaching, encroaching, encroaching, his face glowing with the last rays of ebbing light, until finally the sun dropped below the distant horizon and the western sky became a blaze of red and gray. Then he would just continue to sit there. Of course, it was summertime when this occurred. Ed would not have sat out in the cold for an instant!

I watched him, from a distance. I watched him with great curiosity. I watched him with great delight. I seldom would disturb him when I saw him like this, knowing somehow, that this was a sacred, almost worshipful time for Ed, though, on more than one occasion, I joined him. I remember one particular time.

Seeing Ed thus, rather than drive up to the Ridgehouse, I walked around the back way and came in from behind him, me huffing and puffing from the climb I had to make to get there. (We don't call it the RIDGEHOUSE for nothing!). As I approached from behind, he did not turn or call out. Fearful that I might frighten him, I called him by the nickname I had for him.

"Hello, Ellwood!"

"Hey!"

"I thought I'd join you."

"Have a seat," he said, motioning with his right hand to the ground. "How was your workday?"

"It was fine . . . uneventful," I said, seating myself beside him in the grass.

My dogs sat in the near distance, near Ed but not too close, like he was the pack leader and they just pleased as punch to be able to lie on their backs nearby and lollygag about in the sunshine in his presence.

That was the extent of our verbal conversation; though, for the next hour or so, we seemed to be talking non-stop. Thoughts raced through my mind. Silently, I'd ask Ed a question, and he'd answer. Silently, he tell me some interesting bit of trivia, and I'd laugh. I'd offer something silently profound which the trivia had prompted, and we'd discuss it in silence: religion, politics, world affairs, philosophy, books, music, how we perceived music as performers, how we bombed in our performances, how we waxed sublime in our performances, and just how glad we were to simply be there, at that point, at that time, in that infinite space; seriously not taking ourselves seriously; simply being there in silence.

Simultaneously and out loud, the time for silence being past, we burst out in laughter at each other, knowing that we were thinking the same thing: our tiny irrelevance in the grand scheme as we sat watching the sun stand still and feeling the Earth turn under us as evening rapidly approached.

The magic also past, Ed said, "A while ago, Debbie was making some chicken salad out of the rest of that chicken you smoked yesterday. Do you think we might go and get a bite?"

"Sure," I said, hopping up, suddenly as ravenously hungry by his suggestion as a hound after a hunt. We sauntered off towards the light of my house, the dogs joyfully running about, snapping and growling at each other in that playful manner that dogs have. Ed and I stepped as light on our feet as the dogs, thinking about our chicken salad sandwiches, and not thinking about the things that normally worry human beings. Those things that are now lost in the insignificance that is ourselves; the chicken salad being the only thing of importance, the only thing worth thinking about, the object of our dearest, and most secret inner desires . . . soon to be fulfilled.

"One more thing," said Ed.

"What?"

"I sure would like some of the Major Earl Grey Mango Chutney to go with that sandwich," he said.

"Then all you lack in life will soon be in your hand," I replied to Ed's smile. There was just enough day-light left to illuminate his white beard, the whites of his eyes, and his teeth, all glowing in the near darkness. We later decided that we had never had a sandwich that tasted so good or satisfied so completely.

After many compliments, Debbie wearied of them and declared, "It was just chicken salad." But we knew better. Somehow, it was far more than just chicken salad. It was almost like it

was the physical remnant of the day's sunlight taken internally as bodily nourishment, and it was taken with great thanksgiving.

"What's all this got to do with Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia?" you may be asking yourself. You should know better than that by now.

Old Blaise set this off. He also said this: *I have made this letter longer than usual, only because I have not had the time to make it shorter.*

Blaise Pascal was a brilliant man. He gave us so much to think about. Just the thing for contemplation while sitting facing the still of the evening sun, feeling the Earth turn under you, watching the daylight steal away. What a fine way to spend a portion of one's finite, allotted time.

Is time spent still and silently alone wasted?

Maybe alone and in stillness and silence we can contemplate the answer to that.

One more thing! Old Blaise said this, too: *Belief is a wise wager. Granted that faith cannot be proved, what harm will come to you if you gamble on its truth and it proves false? If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation, that He exists.*

Old Blaise knew the numbers! He knew when, numerically, mathematically, and statistically, a wager was not really a gamble, but a practical transfer of assets.

That, too, is worthy of further contemplation.

**Ed Dye is all over this website. Look around for him. He is not hard to find.*

12/13/09 The Cost of Chemo

The question isn't who is going to let me; it's who is going to stop me.

[Ayn Rand](#)

I suppose she is my all time favorite author. I was introduced to Ayn by my 11th grade English teacher, Peggy VanDevander. Peggy introduced me to so much good literature; I am grateful to her. I haven't seen her in 30 years, but I still owe her much—such is the influence of teachers in our lives. I have enjoyed books since being a child. They are still good friends. I remember when Peggy handed me a copy of **Anthem** and told me to read it, my initial thought was that this could not be much of a book since it was so short. How wrong could a person be?

After I read **Anthem**, I went straight to **Atlas Shrugged**, then **The Fountainhead**, then **We the Living**, and on to read all of her non-fiction, even subscribe to her newsletter. I was an avid Ayn Rand fan, and still am. She powerfully influenced my thinking.

What was it that drew me to her so? I was already a conservative capitalist Republican as a teenager. I tried my best to be liberal as my college professors indicated a normal, right-thinking sane modern person should be, but I was unable to bend myself in that direction. Ayn Rand gave me a voice. She gave me rational thought. She enabled me to stop seeking the approval of my peers, parents, society, teachers, and others, and provided me with the means to stand on my own two feet, declaring, "Here I stand and will not be moved!" She helped me to grow up and become an adult. I owe her a lot, and she is still fascinating reading.

Over the years, **The Fountainhead** has become my favorite. I am drawn to try to understand Gail Wynand and Peter Keating. Peter Keating is the most pitiable of all people. I don't fully know if Ayn Rand influenced **Sinclair Lewis**, or if Sinclair Lewis influenced Ayn Rand, or if they arrived at similar places at similar times independently, but Ayn's Peter Keating and Sinclair's **Elmer Gantry** could have been twin brothers. And Ellsworth Toohey? I think he is the most evil character in all of fiction, and that's saying a lot. If he has an evil twin in literature, it's Orwell's Big Brother, and that's also just about as evil as you can get.

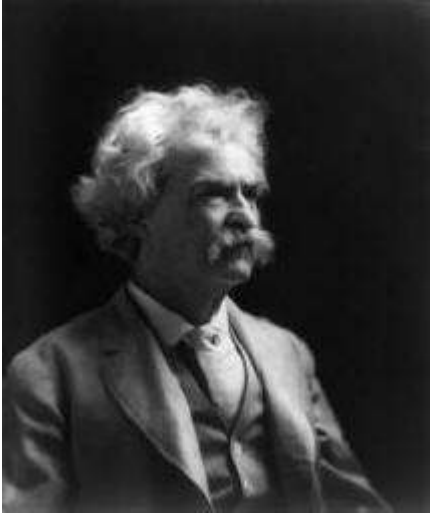
I've had many people chastise me for being such an Ayn Rand fan over the years, asking me, "But she was an avowed atheist! How can you be a fan of hers and reconcile that with your Christian beliefs?".

The idea that I can't be a Christian and like Ayn Rand is laughable. Jesus loved Ayn Rand as much as anyone else. Why can't I love her, too? Does being a Christian require me to only read things that I know in advance will not challenge what it is that I believe? Is my faith strong enough for the challenges? It better be because my faith gets challenged every day. It is the way of this world and seeing through the glass darkly.



Can I not be a friend to an atheist? Who says not? Why would they? What did Jesus have to say when he was criticized because he had friends not considered appropriate by others?

There was a time in my life when I was searching for my own faith. It was during that time that I found Ayn Rand. I also found philosophy and Eastern religion. My faith was shaken, but it survived through this period and is stronger for it. My faith no longer needs the approval of others who, on this earth, sit in higher places. Does this mean that I have all the answers? That idea is laughable, too. I am so far from all the answers though I have grown wise enough to know that I no longer need them all; that is what faith is all about.



Mark Twain said: *When I was twenty, I thought my father was the most ignorant man who had ever lived. Now that I am twenty-six, I'm amazed at what my father has learned in just six short years."*

Voltaire said: *He must be very ignorant for he answers every question he is asked.*

Both of those were me. I win that prize. Now, my son is twenty. At least there are questions for which he will admit not having an answer. He is ahead of where I was when I was his age. I do not think that he thinks I am ignorant, but he thinks that he is pretty smart. I respect his values, though since they say the nut does not fall very far from the tree. He is able to resist peer pressure and use his head wisely, and occasionally, he had heeded unwanted and unasked for advice. I was not thusly enabled when I was his age because I was still searching for me. Upon finding me, I did not know who that was; I needed the approval of those about me and needed that constant reassurance that is never reassuring.



Through all of that, there is still ol' atheist Ayn, gone on now to find out that the God whose existence she denied is not quite as nonexistent as she thought. I hope she and God got all that worked out. It is reported that she was very depressed in the years before her death. Who knows what conversations men have with God, in their hearts or out loud in those still hours of midnight when they see their own earthly demise rapidly approaching? I cannot judge this. I will not judge this. It is not my job. I will let the Great Judge decide. He is unable to

make a bad judgment. He always does the right thing. I can and do have the greatest confidence in that. I am relieved of the responsibility.



[Blind Willie Johnson](#) said, in song:

*You're gonna need somebody on your bond.
You're gonna need somebody on your bond.
Well late after midnight
When death comes creeping in the room
You're gonna need somebody on your bond*

If this thought occurred to Blind Willie Johnson, I don't know why it could not have occurred to Ayn Rand, late after midnight, when death came creeping into her room. I do know this, if we call out to God, He is faithful to answer.

So now we get around to why I started all this with an Ayn Rand quote.

The medical industry can certainly bill you, correctly they assure you, for what it is that they DID, thus you can know its cost after you have incurred the fiscal obligation. But there is no way you can easily get information about the cost of what it is they are going to DO. Their entire industry is simply not set up to answer this question. If you can get to the right person, it can be done, but getting to that person who will take the time to do it is difficult. Getting to the person who can take the time to do it and guarantee that what they are telling you is accurate is even more difficult, if not impossible.

Hemosapien gave me some idea about what drugs I would be taking during chemo, and in what amounts, and some indication of what those drugs might cost. He could not tell me for sure, so I decided to ask one of the ladies in the billing department. She promptly told me that without the proper billing codes there was no way she could tell me. I go back to Hemosapien and was unsuccessful in getting the codes for the planned procedures from him.

I am persistent, though.

If I had an unlimited coverage insurance policy, which I had just a few months prior to getting diagnosed with CLL, I would not have worried about all this. But my insurance changed, just before my diagnosis, to a \$100,000 annual/\$1,000,000 lifetime limit. That made things different! When I first started making arrangements to go to see Gooday at [Big-as-Texas Cancer Center](#) (BATCC), I spoke to a nice lady named Raquel who was setting up all my appointments and verifying my insurance coverage. We discussed my \$100,000 annual limit.

"A \$100,000 annual limit is not very much coverage when it comes to treating cancer," Raquel said. "But you can do it if you manage your insurance resources." I heard her loud and clear. I appreciated that advice then, and I appreciate it now. It was some of the best advice anyone has ever given me. Thank you, Raquel, for your concern for the patients at BATCC and for helping them learn to manage their resources.

Does your insurer appreciate your managing your resources? Absolutely not. They couldn't care less. They will pay what they will pay, and when you reach your coverage limit, they will simply stop paying. I had already envisioned myself in the following scenario.

"Listen, I have worked devilishly to manage and control every dollar of my insurance resources, and now that I am at my annual limit, how about a little extra consideration. You have no idea how hard I've worked, or cajoled, browbeaten, lied to, prevaricated to, sworn at, and castigated others to do so. It only seems fair that after such hard work, I should get at least SOME extra consideration," I said into the phone.

"If you would like to continue in English, press 8. Para continuar in Español, numero nueve," the automated attendant said, waiting silently for my response, and when none was forthcoming said, simply, "Goodbye!"

I stood there looking at the phone receiver in my hand, scratching my head in perplexity.

I actually did get a person live on the phone at PPO Plus once. I asked them to tell me what kind of discount they had under contract with Hemosapien's clinic. The response?

"That contractual information is privileged and is between PPO Plus and Hemosapien. We cannot divulge that information. And even if we could, I would have to have the actual treatment codes to determine what the actual discounts were for each procedure," the young man said on the other end of the phone. I worked him over so hard he was beginning to yield.

"You mean that the information which I receive from both PPO Plus AND from Hemosapien on my monthly statement, which is listed plain as day on both of those statements, which show the discounts for services previously rendered, is privileged, and you can't tell me what it is, yet nevertheless it is made known to me after the fact by yourselves and the people whom you seem to be trying to protect under the guise of a contractual obligation?"

"Yes sir," he said, now somewhat sheepishly, perhaps recognizing where I was headed with this, and how ludicrous it was.

"If you can tell me afterwards, and you do, then why is telling me in advance privileged?" I asked, knowing that I had him there.

He was sweating bullets by now, I could tell, me having boxed him in to a dangerous position he knew he could no longer defend, and me wasting my time on someone with no authority or ability to answer my question. He must have read my mind and very wisely said, "Sir, I will have to let you speak to my supervisor."

I foolishly agreed, and he transferred me. I got someone's voice mail, left a furious message, tried to bail out, somehow got the automated attendant that said, "Para continuar in Español, numero nueve."

I'm glad my mother was not present. I was swearing powerfully when I banged the handset on the wall several times and then slammed it back down on the phone so hard the entire phone came off the wall. I swear I could hear giggles coming from the speaker on the handset, PPO Plus no doubt having me on speakerphone, an entire group gathered around the young man's office cubicle, sipping coffee and being thus entertained by my frustration.

Now getting those codes can be difficult. The [CPT \(Current Procedural Terminology\) codes](#) are universally used by insurance companies, hospitals, doctor's offices, and anything medical to bill you and file your insurance. I had earlier asked Hemosapien for them, but he looked off into the distance, politely declining to give them to me, saying that he did not do that, that he had people who worked there whose responsibility it was.

"But those people work for you. You tell them, 'Give Chris the codes' and they will give them to me," I replied, not thinking that this would be difficult.

"Perhaps you should look and see if you can get these on your own," he said, gazing off into the distance, like this was a very uncomfortable conversation for him.

I was perplexed. Why should this be difficult? I then underestimated Hemosapien, thinking that somehow he thought that my goal was to determine their profit margin on medical procedures. I am too much of a capitalist for that. Of course his clinic has a profit margin. How else would they pay their rent, overhead, employees, insurance, taxes, etc? No, that was not my motive, but I thought that he thought that it was. I know better now. In any case, the sheet they give you at the clinic when the doctor is through which you turn in at the front desk has all those codes (or MOST of them!) I have already explained in a previous chapter how I realized that what I had asked for was right in my hand and got a nice helpful lady to make a copy of it for me.

I sit down yesterday and start a spreadsheet so I can deliver the promised information to the readers about what all this COSTS and realize that the sheet I have does not have ALL the codes on it. There are some codes for which charges have been incurred which are not listed on the sheet. Where go but to GOOGLE.

The search yielded lots of irrelevant information, or at least information irrelevant to me, about CPT codes. I keep getting directed to sites that want to charge me money for these codes when I finally discover the [American Medical Association website](#). Turns out that the CPT codes, which are universally used on everyone's health billing and insurance papers are the copyrighted, proprietary information of the American Medical Association. If you want all the codes, you can purchase and download the list, but you have to accept a licensing agreement which has all the usual boilerplate that basically says you have no rights whatsoever.

They do have a page on their website where a patient can go to enter specific codes to find out what that medical procedure is. From the reading, it seems that they were shamed into providing this portion of their site for use by patients. Again, there is a licensing agreement. To use that page, I had to agree not to share this information with anyone else, nor publish it, nor in any way dissimulate or distribute the copyrighted, proprietary information owned by the American Medical Association, and was agreeing in advance to pay their court costs and reasonable attorney's fees should they feel it necessary to sue me for violating the licensing agreement. Why this information is proprietary is beyond me. Their use affects everyone in the USA who receives medical services of any kind. Something this universal and pervasive should not be proprietary. The money with which I pay for the services identified by those codes is not proprietary (well it's proprietary in the sense that it's MY money, but it is universally accepted.)

Why the AMA would rather you not have access to this information is perplexing to me.

Why my insurer cannot tell me in advance what the PPO discount with a particular healthcare provider is but can tell me after the fact is also perplexing to me. Here, again, is a case of being able to tell to you what they DID, but not what they are going to DO.

Why Hemosapien did not want to give me those codes is no longer perplexing to me. He is an AMA member. He knew those codes were proprietary and that I was not privileged to that information. My underestimating him was in thinking that he underestimated me. He knew that I was not trying to determine HIS cost, but MY cost. He was unable to supply me with the CPT codes and not willing to say why, just a, "Perhaps you should see if you can find them on your own," which I did, thus learning his real reason for his reluctance. If I am wrong about this, so be it, but I don't think so.

S-H-A-R-P is my NAME, and if I can get enough dots on the page, I can figure out how to connect them. Of course, I'll use a pencil and may have to re-draw my line a time or two, but eventually, I'll get them connected.

At every turn, I have been thwarted by those who would not let me proceed, but I am persistent, and persistence pays dividends. I was completely unsuccessful in determining my chemotherapy costs before I had the chemotherapy. That was my primary goal, thus I was defeated. Being able to report it accurately to the rest of the world, since this information existed nowhere that I could find, was an ancillary goal, but one at which I have succeeded. Thus for all of posterity, and for those who are interested, to follow are several spreadsheets, LESS THE PROPRIETARY CPT CODES, which belong exclusively to The American Medical Association, which does not want me to divulge them on this forum, or use them in any manner other than personal.

Would a personal vendetta qualify as personal?

Before I proceed, the question remains as to how one can manage his medical expenses. The answer is, CHALLENGE EVERYTHING. If your physician suggests tests, procedures, etc:

- Ask what those things are for and have them explained
- When they are explained to your satisfaction, ask which ones are really necessary and why
- Ask what they cost
- Ask if they will be done in house or will services be subcontracted out to those who are invisible to you (some of these may not be on your insurance network!)
- Ask what ancillary charges you can expect from other physicians
- BE PERSISTENT
- If your doctor is unable or unwilling to take the time to explain all these things to you to your satisfaction and understanding, make sure that he understands how important it is to you
- If your doctor is still unable or unwilling, be persistent
- You can fire your doctor
- He can also fire you
- If you don't understand, say so, and wait for more explanations
- If the explanations aren't forthcoming, let them know that you will stay and wait until things are explained again
- Know this, though: you will not single-handedly change the way medicine works in this country. Two presidents (Clinton and Obama) and Congress have not been able to do

so, nor will you. If you think you can, you are setting yourself up for a sure defeat, much like Congress and two presidents.

- You CAN make a difference, though, however small it seems
- Like any good commander, pick your battles. Fight them on the ground of your choosing. Do not let others define the terms.

Have I been successful? Mostly, I think. I have learned a lot and am still learning. I have learned to trust Hemosapien. I have learned to trust his office people. I have learned that I cannot bend everything to my will, but that I can bend some things and extrapolate the rest. Though my extrapolations can be filled with errors, I will correct them as I get to closer to the truth.

Everywhere I turned, no one would let me! The question, though, is not who is going to let me, it is who is going to stop me?

Thank you, Ayn Rand. I prayed for you before you passed. I don't know why God would not have honored my prayer. It is with great faith that I believe He did. Eternal peace is what I wish for you now.

You will need ADOBE READER to look at these PDF files.

[10/14/08](#) My first visit to Hemosapien. Includes the cost of the Bone-marrow biopsy.

[10/21/08](#) My second visit to Hemosapien when I got the official bad news.

[11/18/08](#) Hemosapien. More blood work to determine the extent and nature of my CLL.

[1/10/09](#) [First visit to BATCC](#) Here's where I met Gooday and Staff. I must recover the documents and update this soon. My memory is pretty good though.

[1/15/09](#) Follow up with Hemosapien after my visit to Texas.

[4/14/09](#) Three-month check-up with Hemosapien. I was on Watch-and-Wait then.

[7/15/09](#) Next three-month checkup with Hemosapien. Watching and waiting was over now!

[8/10/09](#) To BATCC for my first round of Chemo. Expensive, isn't it? More detail when my next insurance statement comes in. It took BATCC months to file this.

[8/17/09](#) Follow-up with Hemosapien. Blood work to see how my body was coping with the Chemo.

[8/28/09](#) More Blood work with Hemosapien.

[9/08/09](#) [Chemo Round 2 with Hemosapien](#) Seems like a bargain compared to Round 1 at BATCC, doesn't it? More on this below.

[9/22/09](#) Follow up with Hemosapien after round 2.

[10/06/09](#) [Chemo Round 3 at Hemosapien's](#)

[10/15/09](#) Follow-up with Hemosapien.

[11/03/09](#) [Mid-Point Bone-marrow biopsy](#) This was to determine exactly how I was responding to the treatment, which gave me very good news. This was supposed to have been done at BATCC, but I was able to have Hemosapien do this, saving lots of money.

[11/04/09](#) [Chemo Round 4](#) with Hemosapien. This was also supposed to have been done at BATCC. Thanks to Hemosapien and Gooday for agreeing to let me do it at home. This was also when Gene Bush and I entertained the patients in the Chemo Room. I notice that I did not receive any sort of discount for that. Funny!

[Entire WHAT-IT-COST Spreadsheet](#) If you want it, the entire spreadsheet is here, rather than split up into pieces as above.

It seems that my first round of FCR Chemo at BATCC cost nearly \$40,000 before discounts. That makes Hemosapien look like a real bargain. Typically a round of FCR chemo at Hemosapien's was \$17,000. In BATCC's defense, I understand that it costs more to take chemo in a hospital setting, which is exactly where I was when I took it. There are also city and state adjustments to the charges allowed by insurers using the CPT codes, and the City adjustment for Meridian, Mississippi, is no doubt substantially greater than the one for Houston, Texas. Still, BATCC and Hemosapien are working TOGETHER on my behalf, and I believe I am getting the best care possible, for the best possible price. I can take my chemo treatments in the hospital in Meridian, but it may cost near to what it costs at BATCC. I am happy with the Chemo room at Hemosapien's, though I was not so at first.

BATCC did have free coffee. That free coffee was no bargain. Hemosapien showed me where their employee coffee pot was, and when I played music there during chemo round four, everyone was bringing me coffee, candy, snacks, and just whatever I needed. Everywhere and at every turn, the health-care professionals who are caring for me have been gracious and as helpful as they can possibly be. I have learned that when I ask for things which are outside of their normal way of doing things, they simply do not know what to do, or how to answer. This is true from Gooday and his co-workers at BATCC, to Hemosapien and his co-workers at the clinic in Meridian. The medical system, as it is, is not prepared to deal with things in any manner other than the awkward way that is in place. This is not a reflection on any individual.

Doctors despise having to deal with insurance companies. Doctor's even dislike the way the very association that represents them, the AMA, define some things in the CPT coding, which insurers use to deny payment, or discount payments drastically to doctors. I found this when I was searching for the CPT codes. Patients despise hospital and physician charges precisely because their inability to understand the bills makes them wonder why everything costs so much. We despise dealing with our own insurers. Everyone has an adversarial relationship . . . except . . . except for those who do not have to worry about paying for anything; they being less affected.

The uninsured person who goes to the hospital emergency room for an actual emergency or because he simply has a stomachache or a cold and has no intention of paying for any of the services he received, couldn't care less about the whole process. Hospitals despise that, too. They despise having to charge me more to pay for those who don't. This is the equivalent of a tax on me and my insurer. It is foolish to think that it is not.

Everyone seems to despise the pharmaceutical companies, though I am thankful for Roche/Genentech's [Rituximab](#), which is truly a miracle drug. Roche/Genentech will tell you that it cost them millions and millions of dollars to develop this drug, test it, pass it through the FDA, and that they must recover their money and make a profit for their stockholders BEFORE their patent runs out in 17 years (the life of a patent). This is true, but I wonder what Rituximab costs in Canada? in Greece? in Britain? In Thailand? If any reader has this information and would share it with me, I sure would like to know. I do know that it is unfortunate that Drug companies have lobbyists and run political action committees and make huge campaign contributions to those that would govern them, and that those governors accept the money. Integrity demands that this be stopped, but who will stop it when we all re-elect our own senators and congressmen because they can get the earmarked money brought home to their districts. We should all be ashamed. And, by the way, if we didn't have the drug companies, where would our new drugs come from? The GOVERNMENT? There is no easy answer.

If two presidents and Congress can't fix it, or even agree on how to fix it, how can we as individuals? I fear if they are successful in their attempts, it will be even more unwieldy and awkward than it is now, with doctors, patients, health-care facilities, and insurers having even less room to maneuver. What is a big, nearly unmanageable mess now will be prohibitively perplexing, meaning that government social bureaucrats will be making the decisions about our health care because they are the only ones SMART enough to be able to tell us how things work. This is a terrifying thought. See the House Health-Care Bill [HERE](#)! See the Senate version [HERE](#)! Do you think these will simplify matters? I see an entire new bureaucracy springing up, and entire larcenies of health-care attorneys and professionals just to advise us, direct us, counsel us, and see that we get the health care we deserve if it's prudent (for whom?), or NOT!

The more Federal money we allow to come our way, the more strings that we find attached to ourselves, and where there is a string, there is someone in Washington pulling on it. What happened to our independence? And, how did the government get to be our benevolent keeper? As a nation, we are taking on obligations we can no longer continue to honor. We have voted ourselves wealthy from the public largesse, yet we are the public, and the Republic. We cannot finance ourselves, our homes, our health care, our education, our environmental protection, our energy, our public infrastructure, our public works, our drinking water, our recreation, and our retirements on our own backs and the backs of our children. Sooner or later, the government that does this for us will be telling us, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need." I agree with Ayn Rand, this is the most evil concept that humans have come up with. Of course fascism is evil. They just take what they want from those who are not like themselves and shoot them. The former is more evil because it is more insidiously subtle. It SOUNDS so nice. It sounds so appealing. But it is appalling and shameful.

I would prefer that the government limited itself to dealing with interstate commerce and laws, foreign trade, foreign diplomacy (or other when diplomacy fails), and kept our borders safe; none of which it seems to be very good at.

I am thankful, though. Thankful that medicine has worked like it has for me so far. It has been difficult, not easy. I will not remake the medical industry, but I will manage to influence it just a little bit in my own community . . . at least they know me when they see me coming with a file folder in my hand and know that I will not be dismissed easily.

I have also learned that I can get much farther by being politely persistent rather than belligerent. It is a mistake to think that just because I cannot immediately obtain what I am asking for that the person on the other end is incompetent. When they sense that, a defensive wall comes up and one won't be getting much more in the way of help from them. If they, on the other hand, are truly incompetent, I am also able to point that out to them, but I use that very sparingly now. You must stand there and not be moved. Martin Luther said, "Here I stand!"

Enough for now. I am exhausted. I have written the last part of this in a fit of passion and rage. That means tomorrow, I'll be doing some editing.

In the meantime, one more time: thank you Hemosapien, Nurse Jessica, Gooday, Nurse Alice, Nurse Susan, Nurse Juanita, and the kind parking valets at BATCC's hospital, and everyone who has taught me, helped me, fetched for me, done favors for me, indulged me, overlooked my impatience, and was kind to me, sometimes when it was not deserved, and mostly when it

was above and beyond the call of duty. I am humbled by your commitments to the patients you serve.

I am hard to stop when I get going. Who will stop me?

Merry Christmas to you. I know it will be a good one for me!

12/22/09 What I Have

I have Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia (CLL), but it is not my master, nor do I serve it. It has a will and a life of its own, makes its own demands, and requires my resources and attention, but it does not have license from me. It does what it does against my will, but it does it within the confines of a paradox, with me serving simultaneously as adversary and unwilling accomplice. I am not thankful about having this disease, but I am thankful for what having this disease has made me more aware of, and I am thankful that this disease is not all that I have.

What else I have:

- Health insurance (dangerously limited, but health insurance nonetheless!)
- Access to competent health care
- The unrestrained devotion of a loving and caring wife
- The support of a loving and caring immediate family
- A talented and amazing daughter who has earned my respect as an adult and mother
- A son whose company is a joy and pleasure to me and others (who tell me so!)
- Two granddaughters unparalleled in all of human experience (What else does a grandfather say about his grandchildren?)
- Loving and caring friends such as any would envy
- A loving and caring church family
- The gift of music
- An audience for that music
- People who seem to like this brand of original music I am fortunate to be able to share
- Work that is enjoyable, challenging, stimulating and rewarding
- The gift of an insatiable thirst for learning
- Books: Those I have read that are worthy of second, third, fourth, fifth . . . readings
- Books I am currently reading
- Books I plan to read
- A new, continuing experiment in self-contemplation that leads to the opportunity to recognize my shortcomings and to strive to overcome them
- Writing: things written, things I am writing, and those things that are calling out to be written
- Readers, fans and critics alike
- A forum for music and writing
- An interest in things, how they work, and the discovery of what I don't know about them
- The discovery that everything in this life is not about ME.
- The certain knowledge of personal human transience and its irrelevance
- The knowledge that I am not alone in my human experience
- The gift of the ability to be alone and enjoy my own company
- The gift of the ability to be here, now
- A personal God who leads, guides, directs, counsels, warns, admonishes, forgives, speaks, chastens, exhorts, shows mercy, extends grace, redeems, and uplifts
- A NAME for that GOD
- A beautiful home in the midst of a stunning natural environment
- Peace, Joy, Love and Contentment; all gifts that I merely received and did not earn
- The gift of the time I have had
- The gift of the time I have

- The gift of the time I have left
- The knowledge of that time's preciousness
- A body that has thus far responded to chemotherapy
- Competent and caring people to administer that chemotherapy
- The gift and vision allowed to me to see others and see myself in those others
- The recognition of an abundant life
- A cup that overflows
- The gift of green pastures
- The gift of still waters
- A Guide that is more surefooted on slippery slopes than any mule; I just have to put my feet in His steps to safely traverse any dangerous path
- A Guide that is better than any GPS device, never needs batteries and does not consume energy but bestows it
- The benefits of the cumulative total of human knowledge and wisdom available to me
- The gift of Divine wisdom as revealed to others who recorded and preserved it for my personal usage and all of posterity
- The gift of discerning where human knowledge and wisdom take diverging paths
- The gift of being able to reject that which I think is nonsense
- The gift of holding fast to that which I think is good
- The revelation that to have friends, one must first show one's self to be friendly
- The gift of being able to be persuaded by reasonable argument
- The gift of being able to see the other side of that argument
- The gift of words
- The acquired ability to listen and hear
- The acquired ability to make a decision
- The acquired ability to know that things are not always what they seem
- The gift of determination
- The gift of persistence
- The gift of laughter
- The gift of laughter at myself
- The increasing awareness of the necessity of speaking less and doing more
- The increasing awareness of the irrelevance of "I"
- The increasing awareness of the dangers of "I"
- The increasing awareness of the dangers of using the words "never" and "always" in an inappropriate manner when speaking to another human being
- The increasing awareness of the importance of "WE" and "US"
- The gladness of being here
- This Thanksgiving and Christmas Season

What I don't have:

I could list many things I don't have. That list could go on forever. Most of the physical things I am thinking of that I don't have are not things I am LACKING. The metaphysical ones are where the real lack is. I refuse to dwell on the things I don't have any further than the approaching exclamation point!

12/25/09 What Have We Bound Ourselves to?

Why would we bind ourselves to anything less than the Christmas Spirit?

Families come together. Old friends and new friends unite and make contact. Warm greetings are extended to strangers, doors held open, small courtesies are sent forth in a variety of ways, producing smiles on faces never before seen, perhaps never to be seen again.

Then there is standing in weary tired-footedness in long lines, looking annoyingly at the person in the checkout queue six shoppers ahead of us, the clerk scanning their mountain of items then stopping and calling on the intercom for some nonexistent, faithfully incompetent other store clerk to come and get an item for a price check, she making small-talk with the clerk while waiting, and we, eavesdropping on insipid conversations not meant for us, tiring of hearing about her grandchildren, knowing in our hearts that they really weren't nearly as cute or as smart as the shopper was implying, and noticing the cheapness of the trashy things being purchased for those no-doubt delinquent, snotty-nosed, soiled-pants probably illegitimate children; the unscannable item FINALLY cleared, the shopper fumbling in her purse for a check book and, slowly, ever-so-slowly writing out a check, then reaching again into that purse, that deep Grand-Canyon of a purse, fumbling all around until several eternal seconds later pulling out her wallet and showing her ID, and we wondering the whole time why in the world did she not have this all ready, she knowing she was going to write a check, and again knowing that she would have to show an ID, marveling at her inconsideration, thinking bad thoughts about her, speculating that no doubt, her worthless check would bounce, and knowing that this would be repeated several times before we get OUR chance at the register.

Then the shopper, oblivious to all those behind, fumbles her way with packages like she thought this was the old days when the CLERK actually loaded your cart for you. She fumbles around with her packages, counting and re-counting, looking concerned that she might have misplaced something, STILL IN THE WAY, oblivious, completely lacking in situational awareness, and being very inconsiderate of others. We glare at her. We project bad thoughts onto her and her family. Then she looks up directly at us, catches our eye, and smiles at us. We, though agitated, automatically smile back as all of our bad thoughts about her and her family vanish. We suddenly feel guilty about having thought those things, about having actually wished bad things upon her, realizing that she loves her family just as much as we love ours and has every right and reasonable expectation to do so. We lower our eyes. In our hearts, we ask the Lord to forgive us of our bad thoughts and are thankful that those bad thoughts did not lead to bad behavior. We seem so petty to ourselves. We are ashamed.

Then behind us, a shopper also in the queue asks us about one of our selections, and we, the expert, tell them all about it in such a way that the shopper wistfully gazes off into the distance as if daydreaming and says out loud, "I sure hope I can get me one of those one day!" Upon hearing this, for some unexplainable reason, we enjoy this approval from an unknown person and become so pleased at our own smartness for having made this selection, the envy of shoppers everywhere.

“They are right over on aisle three,” we say, being expertly helpful, smiling, more at ourselves and our superiority of store knowledge, superior to even that of the store’s own employees, than to the flesh-and-blood person right in front of us.

Sadly, they say with a shake of their head, “You must have gotten the last one. I looked, and they are out.”

“Too bad,” we reply, our smile even bigger at having beaten them to the last one, at our winning this competition, at our own superiority as a savvy shopper. Thus satisfied, we look at the item. We look at its theft-proof indestructible plastic packaging, which we read sends thousands to the emergency room every year with nasty cuts requiring stitches, cursing the inventors of such packaging, the socially inferior thieves and shop-lifters whose activities are the very reasons such packaging is required. We continue to look at the item: of plastic manufacture, in plastic packaging, printed in plastic ink, originating in some plastic third-world country run by a plastic dictator, where the workers are being paid in plastic, wear plastic clothes, stand on feet shod with plastic shoes, and feed on plastic food served on plastic dishes, eaten with plastic forks.

The fine print on the back of the package says, “Limited Lifetime Warranty.” We smile at that. Limited Lifetime warranty. What does that mean, though? We read further.

Chiang Kai-shek/Rama Prabhathi, PTY,LTD extended this most famous limitation of lifetimes warranty to the original purchaser. DO NOT RETURN TO STORE! This product is courteously and melodiously warrantable from failure in defection materials weakmanshipping from intercourse of normal usaging upon our proper inspecting and rendition of favorable purchaser interpretation. Simply returning the valuable article postage paid to Chaing Kai shek/Rama Prabhathi, PTY, LTD., Postal Code 334758GHT, Rangoon, Myanmar, for inspector ruling promptly if favorable free repairing of replacement discrete to manufacturing.

We are able to read and contemplate this without moving a single step forward in our checkout queue. We marvel at the translation from whatever language, and at the person who thought he was capable of rendering this in English. After our initial amusement at the poor English of the Burmese, Malaysian, Taiwanese or what ever person, we realize that this warranty offers us absolutely NOTHING. We can’t return it to the store. We sure-as-hell can’t pack it up, pay postage all the way to Burma for-goodness-sake, and wait for a slow-round-trip ship to get it all the way back to us, and do without this gadget we have desired for so long now thinking that they’d laugh in Burma at the American fool who sent this all the way back there for “inspector ruling.”

We have second thoughts, suddenly remembering all the other broken cheap imported gadgets lying around in drawers that look useful, but are mostly worthless. Is this also one of those things? Do we really need this? Must we have it? No! No!! No!!! Why are we buying this anyway? We have no answer. We feel foolish.

The person in the queue behind us misinterprets all this. He thinks we are looking at this item longingly. He thinks we are rubbing it in that he wants one, and we got the LAST one. He is

already irked at the long, slow-moving queue, and now this insult on top. His face turns redder and redder, his pulse races, blood pressure skyrocketing. HE doesn't want such a thing. It is really a cheap, crappy product. HE is glad that they are out of them, thus preventing HIM from wasting HIS money. We can take that thing and stick it up our royal . . .

We, oblivious to all of this, suddenly awaken from our trance and automatically extend our arm with the item towards him, saying, "Look, if you'd really like to have this, you can take this one. I don't really need it right now. You take it! After all, it's CHRISTMAS."

He turns red with embarrassment at his sudden internal dissolution of all the bad thoughts he had been readily assembling. We think his red face is a cute bashfulness.

He sucks in his breath and receives the plastic gadget from us as if it is the most precious thing in all the world. We can almost hear a tremendous vacuuming noise as he sucks in his breath taking back all the bad things he thought. He turns redder. We smile bigger, mainly at our own generosity and grace.

"Thank you," he humbly says.

"Merry Christmas," our reply, and everyone in the entire queue is happy, touched with this magnanimous, superlative display of genuine Christmas spirit.

We finally get our chance with the checkout clerk. We start piling the rest of our plastic electronic, Sri Lankan, Surinamese, Eritrean, Malaysian, Bangladeshi, Dominican Republican sweat-shop items on the counter. The clerk starts scanning like crazy. The fifth item refuses to scan. The clerk tries it again. It refuses again. The clerk tries a third time.

"I need a price check on register 21," the clerk says into a microphone, her monotonous voice echoing all over the store in an unintelligible high-frequency feedback as unpleasing to the ears as fingernails on a blackboard, or perhaps the sound of a dentist's drill.

Recoiling in horror, we look at the long queue behind us. We see the glare in their faces, including the malevolent glare on the face of the person who was the previous recipient of our overwhelming good grace. We feel violated. We curse them all: in-bred, ingrates, reprobates . . . all.

The clerk tries to scan the item a fourth time and the register emits a pleasing beep. Everyone sighs with relief. We all smile. In our heart-of-hearts, we all wish each other a very Merry Christmas and health and prosperity. We take back all the bad things we thought about each other in the queue, and most particularly, the poxes, anathemas and blasphemies with which we cursed each other as we were searching for a place to park.

We are all human. We are all each other.

Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen.

Anonymous, but attributed to a 7 year-old child.

12/26/09 A Sad State of Affairs

My Facebook friend, Rachelle McClendon Carver said this on a Facebook post. This is a wonderful piece of writing. Funny, sad, sarcastic, stinging, indicting, worthy of Mark Anthony, it could be truly spoken by well-meaning but severely misguided people. It says everything but says nothing, speech designed to conceal, revealing nothing about the speaker other than the speaker's castrating spinelessness:

Please accept with no obligation, implied or implicit, my best wishes for an environmentally conscious, socially responsible, low-stress, non-addictive, gender-neutral celebration of the winter solstice holiday, practiced within the most enjoyable traditions of the religious persuasion of your choice, or secular practices of your choice, with respect for the religious/secular persuasion and/or traditions of others, or their choice not to practice religious or secular traditions at all. I also wish you a fiscally successful, personally fulfilling and medically uncomplicated recognition of the onset of the generally accepted calendar year 2010, but not without due respect for the calendars of choice of other cultures whose contributions to society have helped make America great. Not to imply that America is necessarily greater than any other country nor the only America in the Western Hemisphere. Also, this wish is made without regard to the race, creed, color, age, physical ability, religious faith or sexual preference of the wishee.

Jim Taggart (**Atlas Shrugged**) could have said this in a speech while Ellsworth Toohey (**The Fountainhead**) was listening in to assure his political correctness.

The omnipresent President Obama, appearing on TV after the "historic" Senate session on Christmas Eve (How many "regular" people worked on Christmas Eve, and why is the Senate working considered "historic?" It may be U-N-U-S-U-A-L, but HISTORIC?), hailed the great Democratic victory and passage of the health-care bill, as if he were signing a final bill into law, which is absolutely NOT the case. He should have brought along his Nobel Peace Prize to wave around for the cameras. I'm sure my "iffy" speech will get my name on Rohm Immanuel's bad list, somewhere deep in the bowels of the White House.

There are several major differences between the Senate bill which was passed, and the House bill which has yet to be voted on. Many congressmen--Republicans, of course, and more than a few Democrats, the memories of hostile town-hall meetings fresh on their minds, facing their own reelections in 2010—have indicated that they will not vote for the bill once it is presented on the House floor, nor do they see a chance to work out the differences in the two bills as presented.

There are several conservative democrats who are extremely uncomfortable with the clauses in the bills which allow for taxpayer money to be used to fund abortions. We'll see if they can be bribed on that issue. It's a woefully lamentable thing for Mary Landrieu (Democratic Senator from Louisiana) and others to be bribed by their own party to vote for a bill their own party says is "vitally important," and others to vote for the bill if language is included which EXEMPTS their states from compliance with certain parts of the "Vitally Important" legislation. (If is "vitally important" for the nation, why is it not "vitally important" for Nebraska?)

It is a completely different matter to take a stance based on one's personal ethics and then allow those personal ethics to be shuffled unceremoniously to the back of the bus for a bribe. If one's ethics are for sale, then those ethics aren't very closely held, and that person is

certainly not very ethical. If not as ethical as one says, where does the line of one's ethical standards and behavior get drawn, and how much money is required before the line will be moved?

"Just keep silent about it," White House power brokers said to a Michigan Congressman. Not only was he not silent, he appeared to be livid.

I am reminded of a Winston Churchill anecdote which I suspect is far more anecdotal than actual, however it certainly sounds like something he might have said:

Sir Winston leaned over and asked a certain lady, "Madam, would you sleep with me for a million pounds?"

"Why, certainly, Sir Winston!" the lady remarked.

"Well, would you sleep with me for fifty pounds?" he then asked.

"Why, of course not!!" she said in a huff. "What kind of a woman do you think I am?"

He then replied, "We've already established that! Now, we're just haggling over the price!"

P.J. O'Rourke called them the, "Parliament of Whores!"

They should all be sent home. Yours, mine, ours, everyone's. They only exist to serve themselves!

Here's my wish for you: May the light of JESUS so shine upon you that you are overcome with His peace, His love, His knowledge, and His grace. I wish this blessing upon you in spite of any previous and closely held personal religious beliefs or lack thereof you may or may not have at the present, may or may not have held in the past, or plan to hold in the future. Does this mean that I reject you if you do not believe like I do, or if you reject my blessing just offered, or simply cannot receive it in the manner that it was offered? No, we humans rejected Jesus when he was here to deliver his message in person. What has essentially changed?

We are bound to each other. We must each walk in the light that we have received. We cannot walk in any other!

Many blessings upon you in the coming new year, 2010 AD.

1/7/09 No-Kee-Mo

I arrived at Hemosapien's office at 8:00AM yesterday morning to begin the scheduled Round number 5 of my FCR chemo. I was actually looking forward to it and moving one step closer to having the entire chemo course behind me. Having already received the good news in November after flow cytometry of a bone marrow specimen indicated that no detectable CLL could be found in my bone marrow, getting the balance of the chemo and moving on with hopefully several years intervening before any treatment would be needed again was no longer my goal, but my plan.

Plans have a way of changing, particularly plans hovering around CLL since there is ever-present, looming and lurking, oppressive presence of complications. C-O-M-P-L-I-C-A-T-I-O-N-S. Com-plications. Com-pli-ca-tions. Kahm-pluh-KAY-shenz. Sometimes, finding a place to park downtown presents complications. Coordinating a meeting between several busy people is fraught with complications. Dealing with one's mother-in-law offers a plethora of unforeseen complications. The House and Senate Health Care bills are the literal manifestation of complications. The US Tax Code is synonymous with complications. Interstellar navigation even sounds full of complications. Middle-East politics renders ancient complications in modern reality. Carrying a valuable musical instrument with you into the cabin of an airliner yields frustrating complications. Explaining to the arresting officer that the contraband found in your pants pocket is not your is not without its complications. How GMAC can receive billions of dollars of government bailouts, announce that they are still on track to lose billions more this year and still be a sponsor of the GMAC Liberty Bowl is a marvel of complications. The mind of Nancy Pelosi has indicated nothing but vacuous complications. CAP AND TRADE Legislation is page after page of complications. How the government let Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae become insolvent is a wonder of complications. World economics has so many complications as to be merely a phrase, not a practice. Domestic Economic policy offers the same complications. Environmental policy is complications compounded. Proper presentation of a tiny dry-fly attached to a double tapered back weighted line attached to a laminated bamboo fly rod in a stiff breeze has complications of which the uninitiated is unable to conceive. Determining why a 115kV Transmission line went out on the coldest day of the season thus far, leaving 19,000 Alabamians without power and getting it back up and running quickly presents complex complications the average electricity consumer user has no clue about, its cause or restoration. Sometimes the guys at the power company scratch their heads in wonder but, not being thwarted by complications, press on to solutions. Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia has complications, too. Some are complex; some are dangerously subtle, and some are fatally abrupt. How would we learn to face challenges without complications? Complications, though unwelcome, make us better in the long run; if they don't kill us first.

Seldom does one who has CLL meet his demise as a direct result of the disease, though this does happen. MERCK has an excellent synopsis of the disease and its complications at this link: http://www.merck.com/pubs/mmanual_ha/sec3/ch51/ch51c.html I am more likely to meet my demise from this disease from a complication than as a direct result. CLL by its very nature compromises one's immune system. The treatment of CLL can also cause damage to one's immune system. When one complication meets another, then physicians can find themselves scratching their heads as to how to proceed. I seem to be at a stage of dual complications.

My already non-functioning "B" White Blood Cells, called lymphocytes, are the cancerous ones. They multiply rapidly, refuse to die normally, as white blood cells are supposed to do, and also fail to do what "B" cells normally do, which is to fight infections. Typically, more and more of one's bone marrow, over the course of time, gives itself over to the production of these defective lymphocytes, and the marrow no longer produces enough red blood cells or other necessary white blood cells or platelets to allow life to be sustained. Death by this manner would be a directly attributable to CLL. Most CLL patients don't make it that far; an encounter with a complication ushers them out of here first.

I have been fortunate enough to be completely responsive to my chemotherapy, thus no detectable CLL can be found in my bone marrow at this time. That is a cause for celebration. Does that mean I am now off scot-free? I'm afraid not. It's just not that simple. There are complications.

My "B" cell numbers are low. Most of the ones left are GOOD ones, the chemotherapy having killed off the vast majority of the BAD ones, but the chemotherapy is not without its complications, either, having killed off many GOOD ones, too. All of our White Blood Cells are important, else why would we have them? Our amazing healthy bodies do not produce blood cells that we do not need. In addition to B-cells, there are T-cells, Neutrophils, and others. Wikipedia, while not always reliable, seems to have a good description of the various types of white blood cells and what they do: [White Blood Cell Types](#).

It seems that I have, as an additional complication (Bad "B" cells before chemotherapy, and now an overall low lymphocyte count in the post mid-stream of chemotherapy already compromising my immune system as a primary complication), now I am dangerously low on Neutrophils. If you went to the link above, you saw that Neutrophils represent the largest share of white blood cells in our bodies and offer our first line of defense against bacterial and fungal interlopers. I have extremely low counts of BOTH types. You'd think that that would make me TWICE as susceptible to an infection, but there are complications on complications. One is at an EXPONENTIALLY greater risk. The line on the danger graph is not increasing evenly as the numbers of these cells decrease; it is no longer a line but a curve, tangential in nature.

"Good Morning," Hemosapien said as he came through the door of the examination room. "I hope you had a good Christmas and New Year's."

"I did. And you?"

"Great!"

We then talked a little about hunting and football. Made our predictions about tonight's game and how Alabama was going to just chew Texas up and spit them out like a undesirable peach pit, then got down to the business at hand. I had already been to the lab, and he had the results of the lab work in his hand. He did not look too happy.

"No Chemo for you today!" he said.

I was completely surprised and taken aback. "And just why not?" I demanded.

"Your neutrophil count is dangerously low. Chemo now might take your neutrophil levels to zero, placing you in real jeopardy."

"Don't you have drugs that will boost neutrophil production?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, but we give them to people right AFTER chemo if they become neutropenic. We can't give them right BEFORE chemo just to have the chemo undo the results of the booster drugs."

That made sense to me.

It seems that a significant number of persons develop a delayed neutropenia (Low neutrophil counts) from one month to six months AFTER chemo. I appear to be one of these people, but the complication is that I am not through with chemo yet. I've got two more rounds I must take. There are also darker, more sinister reasons for a low neutrophil count. We refused to consider these at this time.

"What do we do?" I ask.

"We must wait. I will talk to Gooday and see how this affects the research protocol. You will come back next Monday and let's see if your numbers are better. We'll go from there."

I sigh. I moan. Internally, I wail.

I told him of other concerns I had, particularly with continuing tenderness in my right armpit and groin area which had been the site of enlarged lymph nodes, those lymph nodes now diminished in size to normal, but the soreness still there. He checked me over, tapped here, thumped there, placed a cold stethoscope on my chest and back, and looked at the rash on my chest.

"How long have you had this rash?" he asked.

"A few weeks," I said. "It's nothing but dermatitis. I've had it for years on my face and my chest. It seems to come and go with the seasons, particularly the transition from fall to winter. I went to a dermatologist once about it, and he said about a third of the people he sees come to him for that," I said as I scratched my chest, it having come to my attention and was itself demanding my attention. "I haven't been bothered with it for several years, but it seems to be back with a vengeance. I guess the chemo has exacerbated it somewhat."

"This rash is not dermatitis. It is fungal in nature."

"Nah. It's just dermatitis, I tell you."

"Are you arguing with me, again?" He asked.

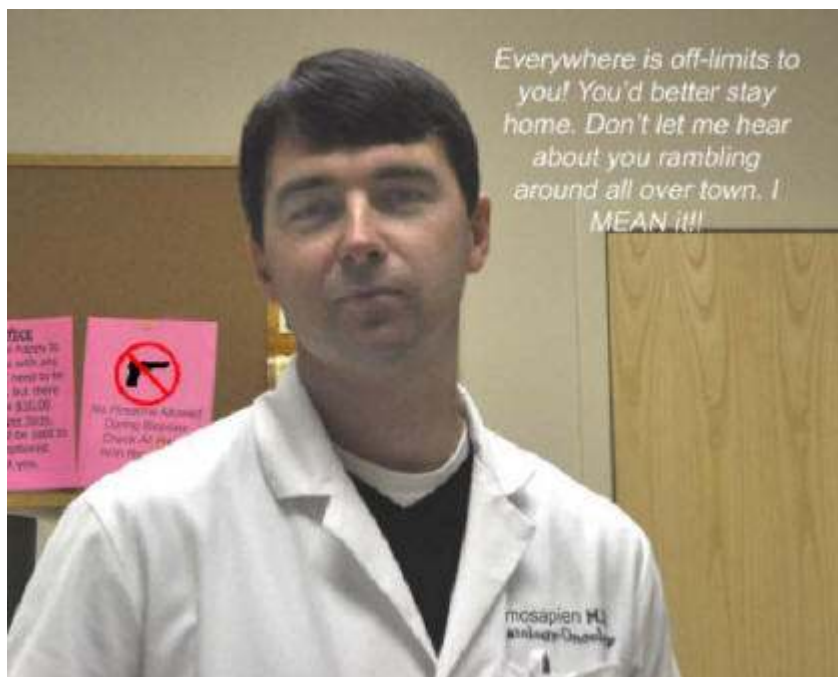
I yielded, the wind already out of my sails. "No, I'm not about to argue with you."

"Fungal infections are one of the primary responsibilities of neutrophils. This will not get better on its own because you have no internal weapons with which to fight it off." He then told me

I asked him about the HINI vaccination and the regular flu vaccination.

"I prefer my placebos to have full effect. They cannot work efficiently with one knowing in advance that they are placebos."

Continuing, he said, "Here is what you must do in the meantime: You have no immune system. You must go home and stay there. Home is the safest place for you. A hospital environment offers exposure to all sorts of microbial things that are just waiting for an opportunity; you are the embodiment of that opportunity. You should avoid contact with other people, wash your hands constantly, avoid any uncooked foods or fruits. Even the mere CONTEMPLATION of sushi, raw oysters, a sunny side up egg, or a rare steak represents a real and present life-threatening danger for you. Crowds are out, handshaking is out, mask wearing is in if you go out but going out is out; staying in is in, and I'm not kidding." He looked at me with as stern a look as he could muster, which is not very stern, he needing more practice with that and me thinking that I could help him one day as this is something I can teach very well. But he looked sterner than he had ever looked, which was clear enough for me to get the message.



"Then your daughter and grandbabies have all been exposed, and you probably have, too."

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"Nope, not even grandbabies."

That, my friends, is a bitter pill.

So here I am, alone in my studio, wishing that I could sanitize myself with alcohol (an internal sanitization!), but unable to do so for two reasons:

- Pointless, ineffective sanitization
- Foul weather, clients calling, and marshalling of forces to meet the impending threat of the weather.

If the weather indeed turns bad and we are called, it could be that the power lines we put back up and the power we restore could be YOURS. If that is the case, know that I had a hand in it from my home base. Any other time, I would have been the first one out on the frozen ground with some automatic splicing sleeves in my hand. Not today. Not tomorrow.

But I can talk on the phone. Being so immunocompromised that even wireless communication represents dangerous is carrying things just a little too far. In the mean time, I sit here, itching and scratching, wishing you could visit, but . . . maybe not today. And if we do meet, excuse me if I don't shake hands, which is as foreign to my nature as anything I can think of.

Complications! Why did I think I would be untouched by any? I'll stick to my original premise: For every bit of good news with this disease, there will be an offset. I mourned yesterday about this complication. Today, I am just itching from the rash. This writing brings SUCH release!

Author's Note: Where Hemosapien and I have actual conversations, for the sake of writing, these are offered as actual dialog. Some of it is actual. Other dialog is accurate as far as my memory can carry me, but not literal. I place words in BOTH our mouths which may not actually have been said, may be paraphrased, and may be purely fictitious. It is not my intention to put anything in here that is inconsistent with good medicine, or to attribute any words to Hemosapien which he would NOT say, though the possibility exists that I might have done so. I hope he will let me know if I do. He has earned my trust and respect as my physician. This is MY blog and I'll write it as I please, but I sometimes take dangerous risks. The reader has again been warned.

1/10/10 House Arrest; Too much time on my hands.

Debbie says I'm under "House Arrest." She'd make me wear an ankle bracelet if she could find one. I've spent most of the last few days down at my studio, where I'm isolated and, thank goodness, INSULATED from this cold weather. I haven't done much in the way of music except pick around on a few instruments, but I have done some work, including preparations for a proposal one of our business clients asked us to provide, as well as some other work.

I also watched Alabama beat Texas (Hallelujah!) to win the National Championship. I'm sorry that Colt McCoy got hurt at the beginning of the game, for two reasons: First, we should all be sorry when anyone gets hurt, particularly while providing entertainment for us (I hope his injury may heal quickly and he return to 100% ASAP!), which is what we all owe each other as humans. Second: Now Texans will be saying all year, "Well if Colt hadn't been injured, the game would have turned out differently!" We'll hear that until we are tired of it, which I already am. The game certainly might have been different had Colt been in the game, but he wasn't, and that is the way the game is played. Some win, some lose; some are winners in spite of losing and some will be losers in spite of winning. It's what we make of ourselves and how we bear our misfortunes that make us fit for human companionship. Right now, I'm not fit for human companionship, not because of my attitude, but because of my immune system, or the lack thereof.

I'll go back to Hemosapien tomorrow, and he'll look at my blood work and see if I'm ready for chemo round number 5, which I was unable to take last week. He and Gooday were going to talk. I don't know if they have done so, since the last word I got was Friday morning and it being hunting season, I'm sure that by Friday afternoon other priorities presented themselves that took precedence over my case. I understand this completely.

Mississippi not only has frost on the pumpkin, but the pumpkin is frozen as hard as a 4000psi mix concrete test cylinder. There's ice covering the entire surface of the pond and swimming pool, the first time I've ever seen this happen. We Mississippians are not made for this kind of weather and resent it highly. It is an affront to our natural sensibilities. I am planning on writing to my congressman about it just as soon as the mail starts running again. I'm sure that Bennie Thompson (D-Mississippi) can get Nancy Pelosi to do something. It should be nothing for congress to pass a bill denouncing the cold weather in Mississippi and shame it into venturing back up North where it belongs. I don't really mind it cold, though, as long as it doesn't get any colder than 65°F. I suppose the cold is caused by global warming. When it's cold it's because of global warming. When it's hot it's because of global warming. When it's lovely outside, it's because of global warming. "Why waste a perfectly good crisis?" Rahm Emanuel asks. The only certain about global warming are these two things:

- Those who keep the pertinent climate data have edited that data for release to the public so that we only have what we "need" to really know and that conflicting data has been suppressed by those who "know" more than the data indicates.
- It has made the inventor of the internet, Al Gore, a lot of moolah.

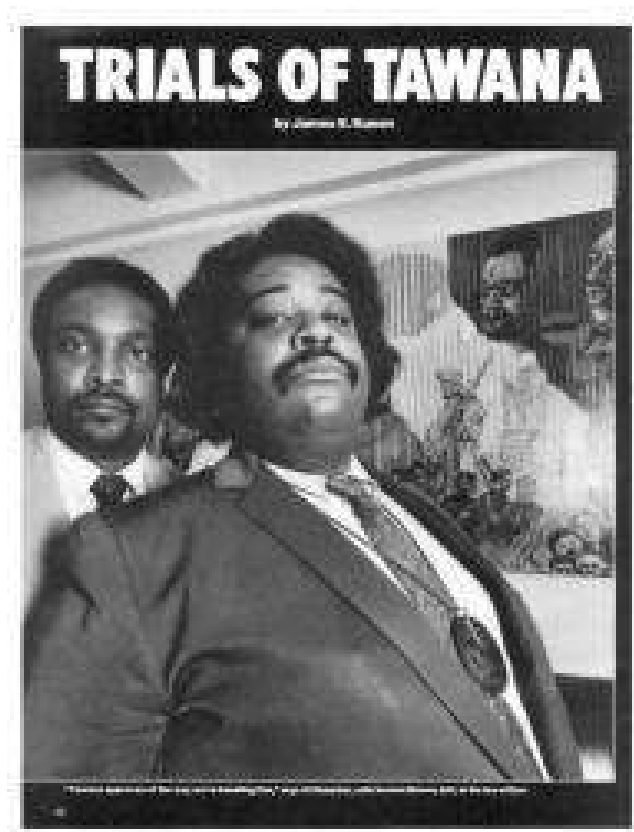
Maybe Al could make even more money with a second movie and call it, "Making Money Like a Bandit" or "How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love Global Warming." Now Al already had a lot of moolah, his father being a long-time US Senator. It seems that one doesn't get to

be a long-term Senator without somehow enriching himself. Between Al, Sr., and Al, Jr., there was no lack of moolah. (Now just how in the world does that happen?)



Al Gore? I have about as much confidence in him as Al Neuman. They both seem to have about the same amount of substance when they speak!

That did it! Now I am on "Al's" in general. Let's explore Al's and see if there are any that are worthy of our attention for their contributions or credibility. There's lots of Al's who have made contributions to world civilization and modern society. Some admirable, some not so. Let's take a look at some of them.



There's Al Sharpton. How he has downplayed the very lie that brought him to national prominence is a marvel of media re-invention that should be studied in every university communications program. He is the very marvel of media manipulation. I salute him for his ability to continue to make himself relevant to modern society and for his foresight and chutzpah to seize the moment when Jesse Jackson was caught with pants down, thus abdicating the throne to Al. He is certainly capable of inventing a crisis when one is not handy, and a capable spokesperson and defender of that crisis. I personally can't seem to reconcile him and the whole Tawana Brawley thing, but excuse me for displaying bad form because I have a MEMORY! Carry on Al. May you serve others as well as you have served yourself!

Al Capone! Now here's an Al that one can admire for his integrity. He knew what he was. He knew he was a criminal. He was serious about how he handled those who got in his way. He and his colleagues have provided history lessons and business plans for scores of modern gangs on how to operate and defend their very successful businesses. Too bad Ol' Al forgot to pay his taxes. Too bad he lived before the government passed out free condoms. He sure could have used one.



Al(ec) Baldwin, Here's a modern day Al that is living proof of why celebrities who have every right to speak out on the issues facing the day should remain silent when they actually have nothing to say. I appreciate that celebrities think they should use their fame for the benefit of mankind at large, but most of the ones who seem to take that job seriously open their mouths and reveal that there is no THERE there. It would be best if they focused on the thing that made them famous and entertained us rather than angered us, or worse, bored us. Alec is bold, though, speaking out about things which he feels are important . . . I just wish he'd get some good advice first. Who does he consult with? Al Neuman?

Al(ex) McCord, from the insipid TV reality show, THE REAL HOUSEWIVES OF NEW YORK. Here are people who have more money than sense. Here are people who have more money than sense. Here are people who have more money than sense. It cannot be said enough.



Al(ice) B. Toklas. Perhaps the first and only lesbian Al on this list of Al's. She was Gertrude Stein's lifelong companion and an author in her own right. Her published recipe for hashish brownies is still a college favorite. Some say the word, "Toke" was a play on her name; though I think that is purely anecdotal. She was not an uninfluential person.

Al(jazeera) The hallmark of journalistic excellence. There are some in this country who actually think the FOX network is less credible.





Al Goldstein. A celebrated pornographer. A champion of free press and free speech, even if his work enabled him almost single-handedly to bring pornography into nearly every aspect of our lives, from magazines and TV shows, to advertising, to video games. I have to admit, Al played a major role in defining free speech in this country, not that I like the direction it took, but do YOU want the government deciding what you should read? Taste is a personal matter. If Al's work offends you, you don't have to look at it. I am offended by Al Goldstein. Al is unconcerned by this. Look again at his picture to the left. Does he look concerned that he lacks my approval? We must be the ones to choose the materials we subject ourselves to.

Al Qaeda. Here's an Al that will raise some hackles. These are the old men who encourage disenfranchised young men with the promise of dozens of young virgins for heavenly sex in the afterlife to strap on explosive underwear and blow themselves up along with all the other passengers on an airliner. Funny how the old guys aren't willing to do that. They are smart enough to get someone else to do it . . . but they can wave their finger and call us the great Satan. Some Americans tell us that if we would just learn to modify our behavior, Islamic extremists would soon come to love us, and the world would be filled with peace, joy, and compassion for all. These men want POWER, and they want it ABSOLUTELY. Al Goldstein should be glad they aren't in charge over here. So should you!



Al(ferd) Packer. Everyone knows his story. Let's just say that he had a taste for exotic meats. Like Al Goldstein's work, this would be a matter of personal taste, but unlike Al Goldstein, Mr. Packer was unsuccessful in arguing his case before the courts. He and the mullah shown above both consume human flesh. Maybe they should eat pork.



Al Lewis, aka Grandpa Munster. What's not to like about Al Lewis?



Al Yankovich, Weird. He's actually funny, with an extremely wicked sense of satire. His song parodies and videos are some of the funniest things I have ever seen.

Al Franken. Al got his start as a writer and performer on Saturday Night Live. Somehow, he got himself

narrowly elected to the United States Senate. I wonder what Minnesotans could have possibly been thinking? I hope he serves his constituents well.



Al Roker. Everyone's favorite weatherman? He's right as often as our politicians and changes his forecast just about as often.



Al Smith. Uncle Dave Macon had a song about Al Smith. Now if Uncle Dave wrote a song about you, you can't be all bad, but you can be obscure, as most of you might be wondering, "Who is Al Smith?" and "Who is Uncle Dave Macon?" Al Smith was a four-term New York Governor who ran for president against Herbert Hoover. Hoover won!. He was also the first Roman Catholic to run for president and many felt that this worked against him in the election. Years later, many Americans felt that John F. Kennedy would never be elected president because he was also a Roman Catholic. Oops! I was one who thought that Barack Obama could never be elected president. We all learn as we go along. To live is to learn. The alternative to not learning is, at a minimum, mental death. The next thing you know, someone will be saying Mitt Romney can't be elected president because he's a Mormon.





Al Kooper. Noted musician and producer who worked with and produced some of the greatest names in music. Not to be confused with . . .

Al(ice) Cooper, who managed to reinvent himself and stay relevant in the world of Rock music for nearly 40 years. No small feat!



Al(exander) the Great. Many historians say that Al had the greatest military mind of all time. He died in his youth, long before the miracle of modern medicine

Al(fred) the Great. The second of our Great Al's. England's ninth century Saxon king. Successfully defended England against many Viking invasions. The only English King to be so honored as GREAT. He was no doubt a much better king than his grandfather, Ethelred the Unready





Al(fred) Nobel. A Swedish inventor who helped to invent modern warfare by making nitroglycerin safe to handle. They called it DYNAMITE. He made so much money off of it and felt so guilty he established a foundation that awards annual prizes for medicine, physics, other sciences, literature, and PEACE, for crying out loud. It used to be a terrific honor to get a Nobel Peace Prize, but lately they have been as common as free car-wash vouchers. Al Gore, himself, won one for his highly visible and fiscally rewarding work on global warming, and Barack Obama won one this year for apparently no reason whatsoever. The next wave of 120-second TV pitch commercials may offer a Nobel Prize as an added reason why one should purchase their useless, plastic gadget—just pay separate shipping and handling.

Al(ton) Delmore, shown on the left with his brother, Rabon. One of the most influential brother duets of all time. They were playing a bluesy rock-a-billyesque music in the 1930's. Obscure to some, but worthy of further study by others. Many musicians were influenced by them whether they know it or not.



Al(abama): The great state from which the Delmore Brothers hailed, along with the Louvin Brothers, Hank Williams, Tallulah Bankhead, and many, many famous entertainers, whose influence runs deep and long. If I were not from Mississippi, I'd want to be from Alabama.

Al(aska): A beautiful state, but far too cold to suit me!





Al Kaline. Played 21 years with the Detroit Tigers. Had over 3,000 hits and 399 home runs. HE was a hustler! I'll bet he never used steroids! One of my childhood heroes!

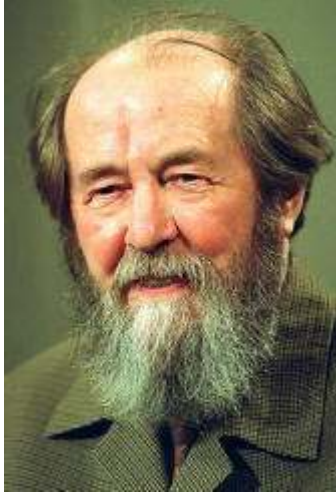
Al(vin) with Theodore and Simon. It seems like they've come back around. I still have a 33 1/3 LP VINYL record of Dave Seville and the Chipmunks. I know all the words to the WITCH DOCTOR!



Al(vin) Toffler. He's the man who let us know that the future was coming at us faster than we could handle it. He was right. The rate of change is accelerating. Alvin's FUTURE SHOCK was obsolete before the final printing. I learned a lot from him. HE is still an interesting read.

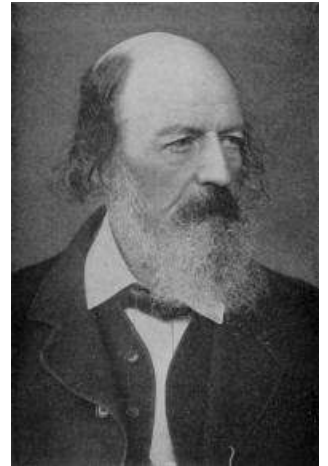
Al(ec) Guinness, Sir: Ol' Obi-wan himself. A great actor.





Al(exander) Solzhenitsyn: Won a Nobel prize for his book THE GULAG ARCHIPELAGO, which told of the horrors of Stalin's labor camps in the Soviet Union. Communism, anyone? Maybe you should read that book first!

Al(fred) Lord Tennyson: Who hasn't been moved by this great poets works? If not, you must have been sleeping through literature classes.



Al Jolson. Actor, Singer, Entertainer. Performed much of his early career in blackface, before it became politically incorrect. Al was in the first full-length talking movie. He had a very long and active career.

Al(Fred) Hitchcock: His work has stood the test of time, still influencing people; therefore, it has passed into the realm of ART. The master of suspense who was able to do more with SUGGESTION than with blood and gore and special effects. THE TROUBLE WITH HARRY is still one of my favorite movies. He loved to make cameo appearances in his movies. Moviegoers waited anxiously to spot him. On his TV show, he loved to spurn his sponsors and say, "And now, unfortunately, we must pause for a kahm-merrrrr-shalllllll interruption . . ."





Al(abama) Crimson Tide: 2009 NCAA College Football Champions. Roll, Tide, Roll . . . and my condolences to you Longhorn fans. Just goes to show you that SEC football is tough stuff. If Alabama hadn't beaten Florida, then Florida would certainly have beaten Texas, too! Hotty Toddy! Hooray for the Southeastern Conference

Al-Anon: Of all the Al's shown here, this Al is the one who has probably helped the most people. Many thousands of people owe their lives to this organization. Al Gore would have us think that we will all owe our lives to the stopping of global warming and, perhaps, even to him for warning us so eloquently. But that is conjecture, unsupported by facts and scripted by those who would withhold the very information they are charged with collecting and distributing for the use of science. The group at the right, though, actually saves lives. I salute them!



Honorable Mention Al's:

- Al(ex) Rodriguez - Modern baseb(al) great
- Al(listair) Cooke - Mr. History
- Al(an) Ladd - Great Actor
- Al(an) King - Great Comedian
- Al(len), Steve - Great T(al)k Show Host and Comedian
- Al(phonse) D'Amato - New York Senator. Alphonse Tomato. Alphonse Potato.
- Al(lman) Brothers - Highly influential Southern rock band
- Al(aric) - Famous 4th century Visigothic Rome-Sacker
- Al(an) O'Banyon - one of my music(al) heroes
- (Marsh)al(l) Dillon - Better not mess with Miss Kitty
- Al(ternate) routes - Wise men sometimes take these.
- Al(bania) - obscure B(al)kan tot(al)itarian-communist country
- (El-)Al - Israeli Airlines
- (Manu)al Labor
- (C)al(ifornia) - Where liber(al)s and (al)ternative lifestyles come from
- (Liber)al(s) - See C(al)ifornia, above.
- Al(ternative) lifestyles - See C(al)ifornia, above.
- (F)al(se) Al(arm) - See Al Gore, above, two times
- Al(bacore) - A less desirable type of tuna; the kind one finds in cans and cheap sushi.
- (Fer)al Hogs, dogs, and cats. Why do we have these?

- (Anecdotal) evidence - the kind preferred and made most useful by Al Gore.
- Al, my cousin

Can you suggest more?

What has any of this got to do with CLL? Well, being under house arrest, I've got way too much time on my hands, am bored, restless, and have enjoyed every bit I have written about influential Al's. Soon, there will be an Al coming near you. Make the most of your Al when you get a chance . . . you may never get to Al again.

1/11/10 Chemo is a Go!

I got to Hemosapien's at 8:30 this Monday morning. They called me in to the lab and got ready to draw the blood. The kind phlebotomist told me that I was headed straight for chemo after the lab work was done. I then looked down in her hand and noticed there were only two vials for drawing blood. I asked if she had the vial necessary to send to BATCC and she looked at her orders and indicated that she did not have any orders to draw blood for them and could not do it without orders. She added that she needed to go ahead with her ordered blood work so I could start the chemo.

"I'm not taking any chemo unless we draw blood for BATCC before my first treatment and after my last treatment of this cycle," I said. I was not angry, but I may have said that a little to emphatically. She did not know what to do at that moment. I suggested that she call Nurse J and find out how to proceed.

We waited for Nurse J to call us back, and they sent me back out into the waiting until the matter could be resolved. Coming out of the lab, I saw Hemosapien, who made the "don't hex me" cross symbol to me and waved me on back to see him.

"It's a good thing you remembered about the BATCC's blood sample. Nurse J is calling Nurse Susan for instructions right now," he said.

I could hear that Nurse J was on the phone with Nurse Susan.

Hanging up, Nurse J said, "They said they over-nighted the blood sample kit to us on Friday and that we should get it this morning. I looked at my watch. Hemosapien looked at his watch. Nurse J looked at her watch. 9:30AM. I knew that Fedex would probably have it here by 10:00AM.

"You can start after it gets here, or you can wait until tomorrow," said Hemosapien.

"Fedex will have it here any minute now. I'd rather wait for a while and do it today rather than start the cycle tomorrow," I said.

"OK," said both Hemosapien and Nurse J.

Before sending me back to the waiting room, Hemosapien explained a few things to me.

"If your neutrophil levels go any lower," he said, "we can give you Neulasta to boost it, but it's about \$4,000 per shot. If you need it, you need it. When we get the labs, if they come back the same or higher, we will proceed. If they come back lower, that will present a problem."

After we talked a bit about this weekend's hunting (which HE enjoyed without ME getting to go!), he sent me back out to the waiting room until Fedex could deliver the kit. My friend Rick and his wife were in the waiting room (Rick has recently been diagnosed with Hodgkin's Lymphoma), along with a friend of Rick's who is a businessman in town. We enjoyed visiting and sharing where we all were in our cancer journeys. Rick's friend had, just three weeks ago, been diagnosed with colon, lung, and liver cancer. They found this at UAB after inconclusive

biopsies here and sent him back to this clinic for chemotherapy. I could tell that he was still in shock at what had been revealed to him as a result of a screening colonoscopy, which he had only agreed to take after the repeated urging of his family. His cancer, having spread to more than one place, he was already considered to be Stage IV. He has already had one round of chemo and was here today for his second. Brother Davey, my pastor, who came by from making his usual morning hospital rounds, and I prayed for him, and our prayer was this: That because of the screening colonoscopy, they had found his cancer early enough that his chemotherapy would be completely effective

Getting that cancer diagnosis, anytime, is rough. Getting the week before Christmas is even rougher.

"They've only got one kind of chemo for this," he said. "You take it and it works, or you take it and it doesn't!" Obviously, he has a lot riding on the success of his chemo. We all wish him that success in abundance.

He and Rick and I continued to chat for a while, then they called me back to the lab.

"Y'all got everything you need now?" I asked.

"Yes," they said, with one phlebotomist pointing out, in an imitation of me which sounded very bossy and petulant, "You sure said that you were NOT going to take your chemo until we drew the blood for BATCC. For a minute there, we didn't know WHAT to do!"

"Abraham Lincoln said, 'plant your feet in the right place and stand firm!'" I replied. "I was just standing firm. I did not mean to sound bossy or agitated."

"You didn't," said the phlebotomist. "But you sure sounded like you were saying, 'I'll just take my toys and go home!'"

"I didn't mean to sound that way. I could have said it in a different manner. I did not mean to be bossy."



"That's OK. You knew what was needed!" was the reply.

After the blood draw, I was sent back to the waiting room with Rick, Nanette, and Rick's friend to wait until they called me

back into the chemo room. We visited; we talked; we laughed. They then called me back for chemo.

Nurse Juanita had a difficult time finding a vein this time. She said the more I use those veins for the chemo, the more "used up" they become until it becomes hard for them to find one. She had to abandon one vein entirely after several tries, apologizing profusely, and finally selecting another one which offered promise. She was successful with that vein on the first try.

So as I sit here and write this, I am getting the Kytril, the Decadron, and the rituximab. The photo above shows the IV infusion machine and my left hand with the tubes in NB=Nurse Juanita's vein number 2. It will take me most of the rest of the day. Rick and Nanette are across the hall. We will tell each other jokes later and laugh at ourselves. Rick has survived the initial shock of a cancer diagnosis. I see a different look in his eyes. The look is the look of a fighter, a competitor. "If this cancer wants a fight, it'll sure get one," seems to be what the expression on his face is implying to the noncasual observer. The casual observer may just see his expression as a cockiness, or a dynamic self-confidence. I am not a casual observer. I see victory in his face. I hear it in his voice. I see peace on the face of his wife.

Speaking of wives, Debbie wanted to come with me today, but I persuaded her to let me come alone since someone had to keep the grandbabies as Piper is returning to school. She packed me a lunch. She filled it with surprises. She loves me so much.

I called her to tell her that my blood numbers were good and that they were proceeding with the chemo.

"Good," she said, and added, "Guess What?"

"What?" I asked.

"Happy anniversary!" She said.

Today, she at home with our grandchildren and me sitting here in sight of a life-long friend with whom I share cancer, while both of us are being pumped full of chemotherapy drugs which we hope are killing the cancer without doing too much damage to the things which must remain, is the 30th anniversary of one of the best and most prudent decisions I have ever made in my life. I hope there will be 30 more. It's possible! The CLL is in remission. Maybe it will stay in remission for years and years. Maybe it will come back in a few years. Maybe it will come back next year. Maybe it will come back in a few weeks. So many maybes. So many possibilities. So many imponderables we are required to ponder . . . or not.

I'm going for the NOT. I'm just here, getting these miraculous drugs which have done, and are still doing, what it is that they were designed to do. That's what I am focusing on. Not the maybes. Not the worries. Not the fear. Just the here, now, and the pleasant memories of 30 years of a happy marriage. The Benadryl is making me sleepy. I can't tell if it's a daydream or a real dream, but I have visions of Debbie, Piper, Canaan, Livi and Maggie. Nurse Juanita has checked my blood pressure a couple of times as I am writing this—she says every 30 minutes. Time flies when you're having fun. Time marches on, but I get lost in it, not aware of its passage, only focused on those things within my reach.

Sorry for the politics yesterday evening. I admit it was inflammatory to list Al Gore, Al Sharpton, and Al Qaeda, and Alferd Packer on the same page. I do not apologize about Al Neumann! Then again, why not have inflammatory excess? I watch FOX news! How could I help myself?

I throw back my head in a big guffaw at myself and drop off to sleepzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz, my laptop precariously perched. Nurse Juanita kindly secured it for me as I dream of 30 years!

Happy anniversary, Debbie!

Update at 1:20PM. I unplugged my infusion machine and went over to the next aisle to visit with my friend Rick. While visiting, I met Janice and her husband Mack from Philadelphia. Mack is getting treated for Lymphoma. He has had the hardest time with complications but is well on his way to recovery from those complications and is responding to his treatment. My prayers are with Mack and Janice.

While talking with Rick, he, never one to let a opportunity for a funny and witty comment pass (he inherited a gracious plenty of these traits from his extremely witty late father, Bill, and his late Uncle Jim) said, "You know, here we are, just sitting around and talking while taking drugs."

"Your point?" I asked.

"Thirty-five years ago, weren't we were sitting around doing the same thing, only with different drugs!"

We laughed so hard everyone in the room looked around to see what was so funny! Nanette had to make us stop to restore order in the chemo room!

1/14/10 Steroid or No?

This week's three days of chemo were unremarkable, except for the following things.

- Hemosapien checked on me every day, which was above and beyond the call of duty, for which I am truly thankful.
- Nurse Juanita, Nurse Marilyn, and Nurse Dana were particularly professional, helpful, cheerful, and courteous.
- The ladies in the lab have learned me pretty well. They are all professional, gracious, and courteous.
- Yesterday, after having complained many times about the detested side effects of the steroids, Hemosapien gave me my choice: steroids or no?
- I chose NO.

My wonderful sister-in-law sent me this e-mail at about 5 o'clock this morning: *What time did you get up?*

I answered her back: *About 2, but I slept well.*

The sleeping well was, I think, because of having not taken the steroids plus the fact that I had not slept for the previous two days. When I woke up at 2 o'clock this morning, though, it was not without immediacy!

I sent my sister-in law this e-mail back by way of response:

Newton said: For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.

For example:

Action - Steroids help control nausea; Reaction - make one restless, sleepless, irritable, and zombie-like after the initial energy boost.

Action: No steroids - No unpleasant, nasty steroid side effects; Reaction: an urgency that will not be ignored.

Hemosapien gave me my choice, yesterday: steroids or no. I chose no. Zofran, my former ally, seems to have abandoned me completely.

At this point, I'd still rather NOT have the steroids. We'll see if I made a wise choice.

While nausea, at the moment, has all of my attention, I rejoice in the endurance of! You see, my LEUKEMIA is already in remission. The nausea is just a side effect of the final stages of treatment, which is putting the leukemia even further down a dark, deep hole, and hopefully pouring as much concrete on top of it as the Russians have poured at Chernobyl.

Now, where's my bucket??? Quick??

I hurl with glee, but am not very good company right now.

1/17/10 Observations

As you know, I finished round 5 of chemo on Wednesday. Hemosapien let me take the last day without the steroids but indicated that I would probably have more nausea without them. He was right.

I thought Wednesday afternoon was bad.

Then, I thought Thursday was bad.

Then, I thought Friday was bad.

Then came Saturday. If Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday were bad, then how shall I define Saturday? The word bad, previously used, now fails to describe, and worse somehow falls short of the mark, and though I have many at my command, I refuse to reach for superlatives.

The Zofran? Completely ineffective. It no longer even has any placebo value.

Still, I'd do it again without the steroids. I have managed to sleep and not have that awful steroid crash.

Now it's Sunday. It feels like I have swallowed a concrete block, which is sitting heavily on my stomach. This usually yields to nausea after a while, yet it is not as bad as yesterday. This could change in an instant, either way.

Bottom line? I'm just dealing with unpleasant side effects of chemotherapy. They could be worse, and the chemotherapy could be completely ineffective. As it is, it's just the ZOFRAN that is ineffective.

I am thankful as I sit here and write this.

My thoughts are turned to those whose chemotherapy is ineffective while the side-effects are simultaneously debilitating. There are many facing this today.

It makes me ashamed to consider any complaints.

- Mike's chemo and radiation have been rough on him.
- They told Jack that he has one chance with a single work-or-not chemo cocktail.
- One of my best friends buried his wife Friday.
- Two young men lost their mother.
- One young lady lost a mother-in-law who was very dear to her.
- Haitians have lost everything.
- Haitians are losing yet more as each day passes.

My discomforts are mere discomforts.

I am even more ashamed.

You will forgive me, though, if I don't want to chat much. I am not yet very good company.

1/25/09 Still a Steroid Crash

After Hemosapien's blessing to forego the steroids on Chemo Round 5 Day 3, I thought I would be avoiding the steroid crash, or at least, that the effects of the steroids would be mitigated. No doubt, they were, somewhat, but on Saturday (1/23/10), during my granddaughter Maggie's first birthday party, the steroid crash kicked in. About 4PM I simply ran out of steam. My boiler pressure was so low I just could not continue. I handed my video camera to my son and went and sat down on one of the sofas at the Lodge; I crashed and burned.

When Debbie woke me up, everyone was leaving. I had missed most of the party. I then climbed the hill to the house, and exhausted, I went to bed. I slept and slept. Woke up, then went back to sleep (unusual for me!). When I finally got up at 4:00 AM, I felt pretty good. Sunday was a GOOD day!

This morning, I am dragging a bit, but still the day offers promise.

I am thankful for a day that offers promise.

The steroids make you feel better than you really are. When the crash starts coming on, you notice that your joints are beginning to ache like they normally do with age, except those aches, having been masked by the steroids, now come back with a vengeance, as if to make up for lost time. Then you notice a fever in your feet and hands. Then comes the crash. You watch the boiler pressure indicator go from red (where the steroids have you, running on a dangerous energy that is really an illusion) then down to green (where you should be, still feeling pretty good!) then down to blue (the level where things no longer work like they are supposed to!) until your pressure is so low that it won't perform any useful work anymore. Then your motor stops!

At that point, you have run up an energy deficit. The promissory note you signed for this energy loan reads "Payment on Demand" and is presented by your body for its immediate reconciliation. At that point, not only is your motor stopped, your eyes can't even stay open. You are down. You are out. You have run out of steam. The last *Fooooosshhhh!* of your engine sounds more like a whimper than a venting of useable steam to the atmosphere. If you pulled on the cord attached to the valve on the steam whistle, you'd just have a drip of tepid water down your arm, not the music of the whistle, not the warning of its blast to make way, nor the announcement of your presence on a foggy night. No one knows you're there. You have become invisible.

The only relief is that dreamless, black and dark state of sleep which overtakes you, but it is not a real recuperative sleep, more akin to not-there-ness, a hibernation, a sulling, as if a 'possum had been threatened, sullied, and thus sullied would not be awakened until left alone in silence. I have conflicting memories of that sleep. It seemed recuperative yesterday morning when I awoke, feeling pretty good. This morning, it does not seem nearly so refreshing, my memory of it having been dimmed by another 24 hours, I suppose. Perhaps it is because I am dragging this morning. Perhaps it is LAST night's 3 hours of sleep which have dimmed the memory of Saturday night's. Perhaps it is both of these things. Perhaps it is neither.

I go to Hemosapien this morning to have blood work done. We'll see how my numbers look. I will report back as soon as I can.

I know you can hardly stand the suspense of having to wait!

2/8/10 Butt Dragging

I have not posted in a while. I have some stuff stored up that needs editing before it can be posted. Thanks for your calls and e-mails checking on me. I am fine, but I my rear end has been dragging. I have not slept well in weeks! Chemo round 6 starts on Wednesday. I'll have a full update then. Again, thanks for your phone calls and e-mails. I am alive and well!

2/13/10 Delinquent in posting/Finished with Chemo

I have been delinquent in posting. I apologize. Many of you have sent me e-mails worrying about me. I am OK.

I have decided, on my own experience, that the effects of chemotherapy are cumulative. The more you have, the worse the side effects. Unfortunately, it does not seem to be the case that you get more conditioned to it, thus the effects are less. It is the reverse. The life-restoring toxins seem to build up in your body, and each successive round is harder and harder on you. I had some days after round 5 where I felt absolutely awful, This was not a particular awful, such as nausea, but a general malaise of awfulness, a covering tarpaulin of awfulness, a pool of awfulness in which I was dipped by unseen hands and held under until I inhaled awfulness after which I was let back to the surface, gasping, only to be re-submerged in mid-gasp. At least that's how it seemed. This did not cease in post-round-5 week 2, nor 3, but continued through week 4, at which time I was to start round 6.

Round 6, my final round for this first cycle and, hopefully, my final round for many years, started on Wednesday, February 10. As the reader has learned, each round consists of three days. The first day of the round I get infusions of Rituximab (Rituxan), Decadron (a powerful steroid), cyclophosphamide (Cytoxan), and Fludarabine (Fludara). The Rituxan cannot be given without the steroids because of the potential for serious adverse reactions. Since it is a monoclonal antibody, synthesized in mice, and my human body wants to reject the mouse antibodies and can do so violently, it must be given slowly. I have tolerated it well along the course of the treatment, though, only having a reaction the first time I took it at BATCC. It takes me all day to get this drug.

Rituxan, though terrifically expensive, is truly a remarkable drug. It is not a typical chemotherapy agent wherein it damages healthy cells along with cancer cells, but targets only the cancer cells by the recognition of a certain protein that exists only on the surface of the cancer cells and not on the healthy cells. It and similar drugs represent the future of cancer treatment. When they learn to synthesize Rituxan in humans, or have my own body synthesize it, it will work like a vaccine. I don't think my friends at BATCC and the rest of the research facilities of the CLL consortium are far away from accomplishing this.

While day 1 of a round is long, it has its benefits. I met and visited with Mr. Harrell, who is a retiree from one of the local power companies for whom my company does much work. He worked in marketing. I know his former boss well but had never had the opportunity to meet Mr. Harrell when he worked at the power company. We have many mutual friends. He first came up to me in the waiting room to confirm that I was one of the musicians that played on the Sucarnochee Revue, indicating that he was a fan of mine, having attended the show for the first time on February 5. Of course, I liked him right away, since it is easy to warm up to someone who has just indicated that they like your music! After a brief visit in the waiting room, I was called to go to labs and he was called back to the chemo room where he was to receive continuing treatments for lymphoma. Not only did we share an interest in music, and things related to power companies and many mutual friends, we shared a common bond in that we both had blood cancers. This bond was growing thicker by the moment . . . a most interesting phenomenon that can happen easily in a cancer treatment center waiting room.

After labs, I went right in to see Hemosapien. He walked in with a big grin. I'm sure my grin was just as big back. He asked me how I had done after round 5. I told him, and he was not surprised that this one was more difficult than previous. I told him that the lack of sleep had been one of the most difficult parts.

"Are you taking the medicines you've been prescribed to help you sleep?" he asked.

"Occasionally," was my reply.

"And when you take those medicines, is your sleep better or worse?"

"I sleep better when I take them," I said.

Puzzled, he looked at me and very reasonably asked, "Then why don't you take them as they have been prescribed?"

I had no answer, just hung my head and shrugged my shoulders.

I went on to explain that I hated to take those drugs, some of which can cause dependency, and was again admonished that I had shown no signs of developing dependency and should take them as they had prescribed them so I could sleep and to stop complaining about the lack of sleep if I wasn't going to take the medicine. In former days, I would have had some smart-ass answer for Hemosapien, but I have learned to trust him, and I accepted his admonition in humility, though when he admonishes, he always does so carefully, never knowing exactly how I might respond. When things have not gone my way, he has taken to holding his fingers up in the universal antihex sign when he sees me approaching. This now completely disarms me and the scowl on my approaching face turns into a smile when I see the sign. Hemosapien is not my enemy; he is my friend and close ally.

I will take my medicine. I will be admonished. I will humble myself.

After seeing Hemosapien, I was sent directly to the chemo room. Nurse Dana and Nurse Juanita were on duty. I was happy to see them and they were happy to see me. We have become close. They are so kind. I saw Mr. Harrell, all plugged into his drip machine and promised to come back and visit with him later as I trudged back to the corner of the chemo room that I like where I can spread out all the paraphernalia that I bring with me and not be in everyone's way. There was no rush to get back to Mr. Harrell, he was taking Rituxan, too, and would be there all day.

About the time I got hooked up, here comes my long-time friend Rick. He has Hodgkin's lymphoma, and was here to get a shot of Neulasta to boost his white blood cells. They had threatened to give me this back in January, but my blood numbers recovered (miraculously, I might add) and I was not required to take this damnably expensive drug (\$4,000 per shot!). Rick had not been so fortunate, nor had his chemo gone as well as mine. Though he was responsive to the chemo, one of the drugs in his particular chemo cocktail has caused a particular debilitating side effect, a rare one, which had reduced his pulmonary capacity to the point wherein for the past two months he had been unable to work, causing an extreme hardship on him and his family. There's nothing easy about cancer. Rick was doing better since his doctor had discontinued the drug, one typically given with his variety of cancer, but the one that was the least effective of the cocktail.

With the chemo-cocktails, they usually have two or more drugs they give you. One of them will be the front-line, the one that does most of the work, the quarterback one might say. Usually there is a second, less effective and working in a different biological manner, which is designed to catch and destroy some cancer cells that may be overlooked by the front-line drug, like a wide receiver relied on and used frequently by the quarterback to get the job done. Frequently, there is a third drug, also working by a different biological mechanism, which hopefully catches the cells that the first two miss. This one works like the fullback who has run a short course out of the backfield, and when the wide receivers are thus covered and unavailable, the quarterback can spot and throw the ball to the fullback who has snuck out of the backfield unobserved by the defensive backs.

From my layperson's observation, those third-line drugs are older anti-cancer agents, available on the market for a long time, are the least effective and do the most collateral damage. They are also the inexpensive ones of the cocktail. In my case, the Rituxan is the front-line agent. It costs \$12,000 per round. It targets ONLY the cancer cells. Then, there is the Fludarabine (it costs about \$2,700 per round). Then, there is the old stand-by Cyclophosphamide. It costs about \$225 per round. If they had to drop a drug from my regimen, I'm sure it would be the Cyclophosphamide, NOT the Rituxan!

Rick stayed with me for a while after he got his shot of Neulasta, then he had to be off. I enjoyed his visit. Though he is feeling bad and cannot work, his treatment is WORKING! That's a tremendous lot to be thankful for. In the midst of his pain, Rick has not lost his wonderful sense of humor. Though the lines on his hairless head and face are deeper, and the pain shows through, a smile is quick to spread across his face. This has not changed. He has always had this. Rick is still in there.

I also visited with Carla. Carla has a cancer which has metastasized. She is gravely ill. Her chemo was making her so ill she was nearly immobile and curled up in a fetal position. I said hello, and she smiled and said hello back. We talked for a minute.

Carla very matter-of-factly stated that her chemo was about to kill her. She said that the devastating effects of the chemo, though nearly unbearable, was all she had to hang on to, but it did not appear to be stemming the tide of the cancer growing in her body. Her one chance was for this to work, and if not, her next step was a brief stay at hospice. I looked deep into her eyes. I saw resignation, I saw indifference, I saw pain, all in rotation, and then I saw a spark of defiance in them. It's that spark of defiance, still alive in her as her body is failing, that will keep her alive and make the chemo work if it will work at all. Resignation will not do it. Indifference will not do it. Pain will not do it. Defiance certainly will. Of course, I offered no empty words of encouragement to Carla. She wanted to do the talking. I am everyday amazed at how cancer patients will talk to other cancer patients.

After she was through telling me about herself, she asked me how I was doing. I could hardly speak. I opened my mouth and the words would not come out, just a croaking sound as a swollen lump developed in my throat and tears clouded my eyes.

When I had recovered and was able to speak, I told her that I was in remission and that I was taking my final round of chemo, that I was hopeful to be through for a long time. She smiled and said she was glad. She held out her hand, and I grabbed it. I asked her if I could pray with her. She said please do, so Carla and I and her caregiver who had accompanied her all prayed together. These prayers are hard prayers, but they offer comfort anyway. We get to a point in

our lives where our prayers can only be, "God, I am in your hands!" Where else can we go? And in the long-run, or in the pre-run, where were we when we started? We can only state the obvious.

Morose and feeling guilty after my visit with Carla, I began to ponder the why's. Why was I getting better and she in the process of dying? Why me? Why she? These are hard questions for which there are no easy answers, and if someone tells me that there must be some secret sin in Carla's life that is causing her to not get better, they'd better be ready to duck. The righteous suffer along with the wicked. We are all in the same boat. Carla IS me, and I am SHE.

John Donne Meditation XV11



Perchance he for whom this bell tolls may be so ill as that he knows not it tolls for him; and perchance I may think myself so much better than I am, as that they who are about me and see my state may have caused it to toll for me, and I know not that. The church is catholic, universal, so are all her actions; all that she does belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me, for that child is thereby connected to that head which is my head too, and engrafted into the body whereof I am a member. And when she buries a man, that action concerns me: all mankind is of one author and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated. God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie

open to one another. As therefore the bell that rings a sermon calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come, so this bell calls us all; but how much more me, who am brought so near the door by this sickness. There was a contention as far as a suit (in which piety and dignity, religion and estimation, were mingled) which of the religious orders should ring to prayers first in the morning; and it was determined that they should ring first that rose earliest. If we understand aright the dignity of this bell that tolls for our evening prayer, we would be glad to make it ours by rising early, in that application, that it might be ours as well as his whose indeed it is. The bell doth toll for him that thinks it doth; and though it intermit again, yet from that minute that that occasion wrought upon him, he is united to God. Who casts not up his eye to the sun when it rises? but who takes off his eye from a comet when that breaks out? Who bends not his ear to any bell which upon any occasion rings? but who can remove it from that bell which is passing a piece of himself out of this world? No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee. Neither can we call this a begging of misery or a borrowing of misery, as though we are not miserable enough of ourselves but must fetch in more from the next house, in taking upon

us the misery of our neighbors. Truly it were an excusable covetousness if we did; for affliction is a treasure, and scarce any man hath enough of it. No man hath affliction enough that is not matured and ripened by it, and made fit for God by that affliction. If a man carry treasure in bullion, or in a wedge of gold, and have none coined into current moneys, his treasure will not defray him as he travels. Tribulation is treasure in the nature of it, but it is not current money in the use of it, except we get nearer and nearer our home, heaven, by it. Another man may be sick too, and sick to death, and this affliction may lie in his bowels as gold in a mine and be of no use to him; but this bell that tells me of his affliction digs out and applies that gold to me, if by this consideration of another's dangers I take mine own into contemplation and so secure myself by making my recourse to my God, who is our only security.

I am Carla. She is Me. We are all each other.

I also visited Rick's friend Jack, who came in for his chemo. He was still in shock when I met him in January, having just received his diagnosis of lung and colon cancer. He was already responding to treatment. He has a long way to go, but his outlook was bright. We spent very little time talking about our cancers, but about solar cells, fuel cells, producing hydrogen by electrolysis, and Nicola Tesla. What a delightful conversation we had. I have plans on knowing Jack better in the future. He is going to become a friend, not merely the friend of a friend.

I then visited with Mr. Harrell. Apparently I am a real gadabout. Mr. Harrell and I discussed all our mutual friends, and he went on to tell me of his hobby of woodcarving. I could tell from the way he spoke about it that he was no casual woodcarver. I am looking forward to seeing some of his work, which he displays in shows all around the Southeast.

He then told me about a mutual friend who is also a patient at the cancer center. Margaret is one of the sweetest, classiest ladies I have ever met. She is the secretary of a close friend of Mr. Harrell and mine. She has just been diagnosed with cancer and just started her treatments. It was too late in the day to call her when I learned this, but I called her yesterday morning. The first thing she did was to ask me how I was doing and congratulate me on having heard that I was in remission—no mention of her own troubles. She said she had been praying for me by name and I was on the prayer list at her church. She then asked me if I wanted to speak with Wayne, her boss.

"No, Margaret, I called up to talk to you," I said.

"Oh?" she asked.

"I saw Mr. Harrell at the chemo clinic today, and he told me that you were also a patient there."

"Yes!" she said, sounding excited. I knew what was coming next.

"Do you mind if I ask you what kind of cancer you have and how you are doing?" I asked.

"No, I don't mind."

Then she went on to tell me about her diagnosis and her trip to UAB in Birmingham. She said she had been referred back to the cancer center in Meridian for treatment and that

Hemosapien was her doctor. I told her she had a good doctor, and that I was still helping train Hemosapien to be an even better doctor. She laughed out loud at this.

"He certainly is a fine young man, and I have a lot of confidence in him," she said.

"So do I, though not so much at first. I had a lot to learn about myself, but I have watched Hemosapien grow tremendously in the past year. I think one of the reasons I have cancer is so I would be able to help Hemosapien become the best oncologist he could possibly be. I know I keep him on his toes. He has to study lest I come up with some questions for which he has no answer. He detests that, I'm sure, but I love to try my best to befuddle him. It is getting harder to do so. I have to study hard myself."

We both laughed. We both agreed that we admired and respected our oncologist. We both agreed that our community was fortunate to have this cancer clinic. We both agreed that we would continue to pray for each other, for Hemosapien and his colleagues, and for all their patients. Then we said goodbye.

On Wednesday, before the start of my treatment, Hemosapien challenged me.

"Were you ever actually tested for IgVH mutational status? (That is the Immunoglobulin Heavy Chain Variable Region Gene's mutational status for you laypersons. I'm sure that clears all this up for you!) It's very rare that they actually test for this since only two places in the world do it, and it is so expensive." He continued, "Or did they just make the correlation because you are ZAP-70 positive?"

"They actually sent my bone marrow to the University of San Diego Medical Center and did the IgVH. The report came back to Gooday from Dr. Kips himself, and I am bona fide unmutated," I said.

"Then it's certain, for sure," Hemosapien said. He already knew this, looking at my chart as he asked me that, but baiting me hoping to catch me in a trap.

And out of nowhere, he asked, "And what does the ZAP in ZAP-70 stand for?"

Without any hesitation I said, "Zeta Associated Protein."

"Very good," a big smile on his face.

"What did you think I was, a mere first year medical student?" in retort, smiling back.

"You've been a good student," he said.

"So have you," I replied. He smiled even bigger. He makes too much money to smile too much. I should get him frowning more often.

Unfortunately, knowing this does not help me. ZAP-70 positive and Unmutated IgVH gene is NOT a good thing. It places me in a higher risk category and means that my leukemia is more likely to return sooner, and perhaps more virulent when it does. I am aware of the numbers,

but I have learned to listen to Neil Earth-Planter, and I will get on with my life and not be morose and sullen about something I can do nothing about.

Yesterday, Friday, February 12, saw the early morning hours begin with heavy snowfall. Previously when inclement weather had struck Meridian, they had closed the cancer center and directed all the chemo patients to the hospital. I asked Hemosapien before I left Thursday where I was supposed to report, the weather forecasts ominously and consistently indicating 4 to 5 inches of snow accumulation.

"We don't know yet," he said.

"Well, I'll expect a phone call letting me know where to report."

"I will let you know. I'll be on call this weekend, so I'll see you whether you are here or at the hospital," he said.

True to his word (and why not?), nurse Jessica called me about 4:30 PM. She had called the house first, but was not satisfied at having left me a message thus, and indicated that she could not be satisfied until she had spoken to me in person.

"They have decided to close the clinic tomorrow. You are to report to the hospital any time after 10:00 AM for your final round of chemo," she said.

So, in the heavy snowfall, I put the ol' pickup in four-wheel drive and headed off to Meridian to Jeff Anderson Regional Medical Center for the final day of the last round of chemo. After the admissions paperwork was filled out, I was directed to the fourth floor East and told to give the nurses the papers in my hand. Lo and behold, TWO of the nurses I had gone to school with. Sandra (whose entire family were friends of mine) and Scotty, whom I did not know nearly as well, but knew and liked nevertheless. I was in good hands.

While they were getting my chemo medicines ready, I wandered over to visit with my friend and former band mate Phillip, who was being treated for esophageal cancer. Phillip has just been diagnosed and they put him in the hospital for treatment because of some complications. Our mutual friend Amos was there, and we visited, laughed, chatted, gossiped, told jokes, and generally carried on until such time as I hear my name being urgently used on the intercom.

"Mr. Sharp, Mr. Sharp, please return to your room. Mr. Sharp, return to your room!" I was missing in action.

When I got back to my room, Sandra was there, patting her foot in that manner that a mother does to a wayward child.

"They finally told me you had gone to visit Phillip. I had no idea where you were. I thought you had left."

I was guilty; I did not argue. I accepted this rebuke.

Then, Sandra hooked up my IV, and I was well on my way to getting the last dosages of this stuff for hopefully a long, long time. When finished, I went back to see Phillip. Amos had gone by this time, but he left me the nicest note.

I then headed to the grocery store and, ravenously hungry, bought everything I could see that looked like it might be good to eat. Ribs and chicken for the grill. Some red beans and sausage for seasoning, all with the idea that being snowed in, I'd cook, and we'd have a nice family gathering. Today, the thought of me cooking anything, or enjoying eating anything seem much farther removed. I'm not going to cook anything. I'm not going to eat anything. I'm going to tote this small paint pail around, and every time I wretch, I am going to be thankful that I did not have to take extra steroids. I am going to be thankful that the chemotherapy they gave me has WORKED, and that every symptom of a side effect of the chemotherapy is something for which I am to be thankful. I am going to think about Carla. I am going to pray for her. I am going to think about Mrs. Grace and pray for her. I am going to think about and pray for Margaret, Mr. Harrell, Rick, Jack, Mr. Riley, Mr. Hooper, and David-in-Tupelo and his sister. In wretchedness, I will rejoice. In discomfort, I will be cheerful. Though I will know despair one day in the future, I will not know despair today.

Today, I will step outside the studio and look at the sun shining on the beautiful blanket of snow that is covering the ground, and I will lean over, retch and throw up until my nose bleeds, and be thankful for every heave.

I will also think about what I posted on Facebook a couple of days ago.

When you see others in grim circumstances, consider the mirror into which you gaze . . . then walk away in humility and thanksgiving for what you have.

And you? How are YOU doing?

2/20/10 Deep Dark Foreboding Feelings

Last Friday I finished my chemo. For three days afterward, I felt pretty bad. While feeling bad, darkly bad, this went through my mind.

*Deepest darkest foreboding
Of life-giving toxic chemicals
Pushed through veins
Tired of assaults and punctures
Rolling, resisting, rebelling
At indignities and attacks by others.*

*MY body says enough! And more!
MY mind races, MY mind races.
MY pains. My woes. MY ills.
ME. ME. ME. ME. ME.*

*But SHE.
The labored breath and groans next to me
come from one
Also getting toxic cocktails
That promise everything
yet for her deliver nothing but pain.
Hairless with skin eruptions
Stomach lined with concrete blocks
And eyes colored like Haitian cement
Looking at her worried mother
Whose brow furrows like
Soybean fields plowed
Too soon by desperate farmers
After winter rains
Clumped up piles of wadded intractable earth
No order to the chaos caused by the tractor
Pulling a heavy plow through a field
Not ready, not receiving, not responding
Just like her daughter's body.
"She's not doing well at all," her mother said.
"The doctor says that it's just a matter of time now."*

*Melanoma spreads to livers
To kidneys
To colons
To lungs
To other vital places
Leaving jaundiced colors to skin
Already insulted by a host of toxins.
Those promising toxins
They promise all
They don't deliver for some*

*Like congress
Like political candidates
Like TV preachers
"Stretch forth your hand and
send your seed faith gift of \$49.95 or more
plus shipping and handling
for our free series of cassette tapes entitled
"Faith and Healing and Why Your
Personal Failings Prevented Yours""
The radio blares in frequencies harsh on the ears
And words harsher on the heart.*

*Her real pastor immediately near
Praying in earnest humility
Before a Divine providence
He doesn't fully understand
Yet moved by a faith that is genuine and real
He holds her hand.
I see her hand clasp his urgently
And then tighten further.
He offers a prayer to a loving God
He asks for healing
He asks for comfort
He asks for peace
I pray with them
I pray earnestly.*

*Through the tangle of tubes carrying chemicals
To my own veins
In mid-prayer I reach for her Mother's hand.
Her Mother grabs it like
A starving man would grab
A moldy piece of bread.
She squeezes my hand hard and harder still
But not at all like the hand-squeeze
Of an intrusive life insurance salesman
Whose handshake now would be
As comforting and effective as
Her application for a policy
As comforting and as effective
as the medicine
Pumped into her veins.
She squeezes more like there is some essence
In me she would claim for her daughter.
I give it freely.
I give every microgram
Every nanogram
Every angstrom's length of it
Every Joule Watt Newton Erg Calorie BTU
By whatever unit it can be measured
By whatever tools it can be measured with.*

*Every grain and dram I can muster, withholding nothing
If her squeeze of my hand
During the pastor's prayer
Can somehow transfer any bit of it
To the failing life of her precious daughter
The product of her own body
Her life's biggest investment.
But how can faith be measured?
How can faith be transferred?*

*Haitian Cement gray, jaundice yellow
No color chips for these
At Sherwin-Williams.
Maybe paint-color names will help.
We'll call it "Earth Ochre"
Perhaps "Battleship Gray"
Or "The color formerly known as NORMAL"
That's it.
Just a change in perspective.
Just a redefinition of terms.
Just a wave of the hand.
Just a denial of reality.
Denial of reality, is that what faith is?
Jesus said Faith moves mountains.
Yet her mountain seems immovable.
It does not flee at the utterance of
Words that sound faithful.
Where is our faith?
I'll look at Sherwin Williams.
Maybe they have a color called "Sure-fire Faith."*

*What will kill her? Her lack of faith?
Or perhaps it is the cancer?
It's the CANCER.
I wish that TV preacher were here
So I could get my hands around his neck.
I'd bitch-slap him right in front of the real pastor.
I'd take his own bible out of his hand
And thump him with it until he cried "UNCLE."*

*I bless that humble man who is THERE
That humble man who offers COMFORT
That humble man who sheds tears WITH them
In his own grief mourning his lack of ability
To change the situation
erroneously daring to think
her impending demise
Is somehow his personal failure.
In the face of faith
we all face our own demise.
Why, then, would this be his personal failure?*

*Eliphaz , Zophar, and Bildad said to Job
"Job, old buddy, you must admit to
the secret sins that caused
your great misfortune."
Job said, "I will admit no such thing."
God said, "Job is an upright and righteous man."
GOD said it. GOD said it. GOD said it.
God never said that about Eliphaz.
He never said that about me.
He never said that about that TV preacher.
He never said that about the fervently praying Pastor
Whose brow sports sweat beads akin
To the furrows on the mother's.
Eliphaz, et.al., or GOD. Take your pick.
With the greatest confidence
I'll pick GOD over Job's buddies.
Yet Job suffered. Job suffered horribly.
Job suffered wickedly.*

*I suffer now because I am doing well
And I feel guilty about it.
I wonder why am I not the one who is dying?
Why she? Why not me?
How pointless is that?
I expect any day to read a certain
Young woman's name in the obituaries
In the daily newspaper.
I look every day.
I pray for her recovery every day.
Yet I look in the obituaries every day*

*When I find her name
I will see it spelled out.
It will spell out her name.
It will seem to be a name that is not my name.
But just as sure
as if it were spelled just like mine
It will be my name that I see
and I will mourn my own demise with hers.*

*When her pastor finished praying
SHE looked at me with those cement gray eyes
And there was the spark of life in them
Invisible for some, but I saw it clearly
And then she smiled.
With labored breath but a grace that filled the room
With a sweet aroma I can still smell
She said, "Thank you for praying with me and my mother.
It meant so much to us both."*

*My words have failed me now
But others I recall that were recorded so long ago
Now come fresh to my mind
speaking without fail
across ages of human loss and suffering.*

*For now we see through a clouded dark glass;
but then face to face:
now I just partly know;
but then I shall know and shall also be known.
These three things abide: faith, hope and love;
but the greatest of these is love.*

*These are the words I will keep.
I'll reject the rest.*

Other than that, I'm doing just fine! a five mile hike yesterday through gorgeous woods along the creek. Just delightful. My old self is returning.

I AM SO THANKFUL FOR WHAT I HAVE!

2/25/10 Can You Say NEUTROPENIA?

There's fact and there's fiction. They are both here. You must choose where one ends and the other begins. I have warned you before.

Rick is in the hospital. He is having major complications from his chemo. Chemo is dangerous business, but then it must be. One doesn't get out a .22 to shoot a charging lion, but a big bore rifle with a big kick. It must stop the charging lion in its tracks, or the lion's charge can be fatal. With a suitable big-bore rifle, at best you'll have a bruised shoulder and a dead lion, and less desirable, a gun malfunction that still kills the lion but maims the shooter, and at worst a gun malfunction that maims the shooter and leaves the lion unaffected. I'm claiming a bruised shoulder from a well-placed bullet for Rick. A bruised shoulder is sore as hell, but it heals in time, perhaps, long after the lion is dead.

"You are neutropenic," Hemopsapient said to me. "Go home!"

Now the Earth is not sterile. Mississippi is not sterile. My home is not sterile. Sterile is what I need. Mississippi is what I have.

Mississippi may be at its most sterile point right now, though. The cold weather has put spores, bacteria and other microbes into a hibernation, a winter respite, a frigid isolation that will vanish with the spring sun and humidity. Life here in spring and summer grows with reckless abandon—the life that we can see, and the life that escapes our vision but affects our lives, nevertheless. Life is ever restless here, ever encroaching. An untended pasture left idle for two years becomes a tangle of briars and weeds through which only snakes and rabbits can pass unscathed. Pastures once grazed by cattle, leaving their own lively uncleanness to fertilize that which must inevitably come after, pastures through which one could have walked briskly last year, are now choked with wait-a-minute vines. These are the ones that grab you as you pass and seem to ask, "What's your rush? Why don't you just stay here and wait a minute?" That minute is required for disentanglement, alone. Stemming blood flow from briar-scratches and a chemotherapy induced low-platelet count can take longer than a minute. You can almost hear the saw-briars laughing at you. You can almost hear the rabbits laughing. You can rally hear the s-s-s-snakes s-s-s-slithering along through the weeds, hissssssing with laughter, but you can't see them, your feet being shrouded by a damp thickness, through which you dare not peer lest you see something you'd rather not.

For some reason, I am transported to the school cafeteria. In line with my tray, I reach for the silverware as I approach the food bar, hair-netted ladies placing food on trays ahead of me, food that looks like it might be leftover government commodities, canned and prepared by those companies unable to qualify for a contract to make MRE's for the Army, and struggling to sell their manufacture to institutions looking for the lowest bidder. It's lowest-bidder food being dolloped out onto the trays by the hair-netted ladies, stern looks on their faces, always looking like someone else's grandmother, never mine. How did I get in line in this school cafeteria? Why am I here?

Still reaching for the silverware, and wondering why we still call it that, silver being as far from this place as food prepared with fresh ingredients and even further from the not-so-stainless steel utensils I am approaching. I see the forks, knives and spoons. Ahead of me, I also see hands, some merely unwashed, some seemingly filthy, handling the silverware. When it is my

turn, I pause to inspect each fork and knife before I make my final selection, as if my eyes alone could tell me which ones were home to undesirable colonizations and which were not. After some time, the people behind me getting impatient, I make my final selection, more satisfied than a random grab, but really preferring to wait until fresh hot silverware came out of the dish washing machine somewhere in the bowels of the cafeteria. I could not wait that long. The folks behind me are making impatient noises, so I take what I have and move forward toward the mostly gray and brown food, watched over like diamonds in a mine by the hair-netted other-grandmother ladies, afraid they'll put one more gray-green bean on the tray than they should. The gray-green beans look less promising than the silverware in my hand, but I am hungry and press on towards the dollops which will soon be placed on my own tray.

The lady behind me sneezes into her right hand, wipes off her nose and mouth with that hand, rubs it onto her pants leg, sniffing a time or two to reclaim into her own body that which would not be reclaimed. She sneezes again harder this time. Her left hand holding her tray and silverware, her right hand flying to her mouth, no doubt failing to contain all the particles flying from her mouth and nose faster than Nolan Ryan can throw a fastball and spraying all those around her in a manner akin to me spraying the lawn with weed-killer from an applicator at the end of a garden hose. At one time, this would have gone without notice, but today I feel violated. This woman's bodily fluids have now penetrated those around her. Perhaps "penetrated" is a harsh word, perhaps too suggestive. We're just talking about two sneezes in the line at a cafeteria. I have no connection with this woman other than the cafeteria line. No connection, that is, until her sneezes. Now, perhaps, we are bonded in an innocent but very intimate and dangerous liaison. I wince at the thought but keep on moving through the line.

The vivid redness of the beets catch my eye like a red ribbon around a box of chocolates amid the myriads of brown and gray on the buffet. "I'll have some of the beets," I said to hair-netted lady number one, hovering over three bays of the buffet, "and some of the not-so-green beans."

She did not think this at all funny. She had no sense of humor. She dolloped the beets out onto my tray with a clang of the spoon, spattering crimson beet sauce over the tray, reminding me of the blood shed in untended pastures. She then scooped up a heaping spoonful of the gray-green beans and, cutting her eyes at me and flashing a missing-bicuspid evil smirk, shook beans off the spoon until I was sure I was at only 75% of my full bean entitlement. This was her way of punishing me for my remark which she apparently took as a personal insult of her culinary skills, which at this cafeteria consisted of placing gallon cans of army-reject green beans in a device that cuts them open and the pouring of them into a 25 gallon pot already on the stove for heating. These beans were now being served at a tepid less-than-140 degree temperature, which meant that any particulate ejecta from the sneezes of the woman behind me failing to be caught by the useless glass shield of the buffet warmer—since NONE of us sneezes while standing erect, leaning down to do so, and had she remained erect, she was too short for the glass shield to be effective—those particles were now growing in the tepid, warm moisture of the gray-beans, bacterial cells multiplying and dividing as rapidly as nature would allow, prompted by the warmth, which, unable to be classified as HEAT, left them undeterred to do so.

I started to say something about the bean-shortage, but the bicuspid-less, hair-netted, other-grandmotherly lady's look stopped me dead in my tracks. I moved on to the next hair-netted lady, hovering over her three food bays like an emperor penguin father over the egg he faithfully tends throughout the darkness of a desolate, howling Antarctic winter. This hair-

netted lady presided over the meat. She had a look about her that one might see in the offspring of a union between Lee Marvin and James Coburn. I suppose to some this is not completely undesirable in a mature man, but absolutely remarkable in a woman. Her eyebrows were so bushy, she had them combed back as neatly as she could, which was far neater than my moustache, but not quite, just ever-so-slightly-not-quite, as bushy. Instead of a moustache on her lip, there were tiny sweat-beads. I was so fascinated, I was peering, trying to count them. I lost count when her lips moved.



"Beef Tips over rice, Salisbury Steak, or Chicken Spaghetti?" She asked.

I looked at the beef tips. I looked at the Salisbury Steak. I looked at the tiny sweat beads on her lip. I looked at the hair-net on her hair. I wondered why it did not cover her eyebrows. Surely, there was a rule that that much hair had to be covered as well. I glanced around for a SERVE-SAFE certificate, which should have been placed somewhere visibly near where the food was being served. I did not see one. I'm sure one was there, somewhere, but a glance did not reveal it.

"Beef Tips over rice, Salisbury Steak, or Chicken Spaghetti?" She asked, again, louder this time.

I looked at the Beef Tips and Salisbury Steak, again. For the life of me, I could not see any difference between the two. Chopped up cull-brood-cow in brown gravy in food bay number 4, and ground-up re-assembled cull-brood-cow in the same brown gravy in food bay number 5. I then looked at the chicken spaghetti in food bay number 6. I shuddered at the sight of it.

Now I love chicken. The contribution of that bird to human civilization is incalculable, but I will only eat chicken under certain closely held and sacred circumstances. I will almost NEVER eat it if someone **else** has cooked it. I will not eat fried chicken from a convenience store, Popeyes, KFC or anywhere else. I will eat it if I fried it, my mother fried it, or my wife fried it. I love and will eat smoked and barbecued chicken that I have cooked at my own home, but I will not eat it if it has been cooked by someone somewhere else. I haven't always been this way, but I have become obsessive about it. I have no answer as to how I developed this obsession; it is there, nevertheless. I will not eat chicken at church pot-luck; I don't care which good-sister-so-and-so fried it. I have a few non-home exceptions to this. These all revolve around elderly black people who helped teach me how to cook—who are dying out now as that entire generation passes on into the ages—and their offspring because I know whose hands and instructions they learned to cook AT.

The chicken spaghetti looked like something that had already been eaten and regurgitated. It had the yellowness of saffron but certainly not the elegance of saffron. It was more by way of

powdered cheese mixed with powdered milk and salted like a silver-mine straight from a Mark Twain story, with a big chunk here and there of a piece of old worn-out-laying-hen carcass.

I looked again at the uncovered bushy eyebrows. I looked at the sweat beads on the lip. I looked at the chicken spaghetti.

"Sir, you are holding up the line! Now what'll it be?" Her belligerence was nearly uncontrollable. She could tell I was amazed at those eyebrows.

My mind now made up, "I don't want any meat. I'll just have a roll to go with these beets and green-eyebrows," I said.

"What!!!???"

"I mean green-beans," my face now as crimson in embarrassment as the beet-sauce spattering my plate and hers just as crimson from anger.

The first roll she bounced onto my tray bounced right off and onto the floor.

"Those are some heavy-duty rolls," I laughed, trying to make a joke and ease the tension, but it would not be eased.

She looked down at the roll on the floor. For a split-second, I could tell that it crossed her mind to pick it back up and put it on my tray, which I am firmly persuaded she WOULD have done had no one been watching. Oh, Lord, protect us from what goes on in food-preparation places when no one is watching! She ever-so-slightly leaned down towards the roll, the greasy tongs in her hand making an ever-so-subtle hint of movement towards the roll now on the floor.

"You wouldn't DARE!" I said, our faces both crimson again, but the reasons reversed this time. Her crimson embarrassment meant that I had correctly read her mind. She WOULD have picked that roll up. Eyes down, now completely hidden by those eyebrows, she placed a fresh roll on my tray. I gave one more look at those eyebrows and beads of sweat on her lip and this time I stared long and hard, deliberate. Her face had turned crimson again, this time back to an angry crimson, everything now crimson-less except for HER face and the beets on my tray. I was beyond anger and embarrassment. I had read her mail. I had caught her with her pants down. I was sublimely superior to her, having caught her, one might say, *in flagranti delicto*. The color on my face was no doubt similar to the color on Napoleon's face as he snatched the imperial crown from the hands of Pope Pius VII



and placed it on his own head. I had all the confidence, vigor and power of a newly crowned emperor.

She could not help it that she looked like the child of Lee Marvin and James Coburn, but she could surely trim those eyebrows a bit as she brushes them back every day. I'd buy her some scissors.

I moved on with my tray toward the cashier, now drunk on the wine of my own unparalleled, imperially superlative humanity.

During all of this, the sneeze-lady had gone around me and was now making her payment and getting her change as I was approaching. She had paid in one-dollar bills. I didn't think anything about this. I did not mind that she had gone around me; I was not inconvenienced by that. Though I now looked around, suspicious of anything she might have touched.

"Vegetable plate and tea. That'll be \$5.60," said the cashier when I arrived.

I handed her a ten.

She counted out the four dollars and forty cents change and held it out to me. I went to reach for it automatically but had an instantaneous frightening thought I suddenly pulled my hand back at the same instant she was trying to place the money in it. The dollar bills and the change went straight to the floor, the coins naturally rolling into the most inaccessible places as the dollar bills fluttered to the ground. These dollar bills were the same ones that had been given to the cashier by the sneezing woman, who, holding her tray in her LEFT hand had used the same hand into which she had sneezed to give the cashier the money.

"I'm sorry," said the cashier, mistakenly and graciously thinking that this somehow must have been her fault. She reached into the cash drawer and got out some dollar bills that, while I could not be sure were NOT tainted by disease, microbes, or someone else's precious bodily fluids, I knew weren't the same ones handled by sneezing-woman. Still I was wary.

Holding my tray firmly in both hands, gripping it as if it were too heavy to hold for an instant with one hand, I turned my side to the cashier.

"Would you please just stick that in my coat pocket?" I asked. She smiled and did so, then closed the cash drawer and retrieved the dollar bills on the floor, the invisible coins having to wait until the lunch rush was over.

Satisfied with how that worked out, I looked around for a place to sit. There was sneezing-woman sitting by herself at the only table that was not crowded. I did not want to sit there.

I looked around for a seat, not really wanting to sit too near anyone, but it was looking more and more like the choices would be to sit next to some stranger or sit at sneezing-woman's table. I gazed and gazed as more and more people passed by me. Across the entire room, I saw the wave of a white-sleeved arm with a beckoning hand. It was Hemosapien. Seated with him at a table way over in the corner were Margaret, Harrell, Rick, Mrs. Grace, Neil-Earth Planter, Johnny D., Phillip, Mike, Jimmy, Carolyn, and Dr. Cecil. It seemed like a lunch-meeting over which Hemosapien was presiding. There was one seat left at the table and Hemosapien pulled it back and invited me to sit down.

"Well fancy seeing all you here!" I said cheerfully. Everyone at this table was a cancer patient, a cancer survivor, or a physician, or both.

They all said hello back and smiled all around as I dove into my beets and gray-green beans.

"What brought you all together, here?" I asked, cheerfully.

"We followed you here, knowing you'd be unable to stay put," Hemosapien said in an ominous tone.

"And with good reason," said Dr. Cecil by way of reprimand, of which he was never short on giving, nor at which he was ineffective. Such is the respect I have had for this man-physician-surgeon-cancer survivor, who served as my physician from the time I was a teenager until in my 30's when I moved away.

"You shouldn't be here in this crowd of people," said my friend and fellow cancer patient, Margaret, gently, sweetly, but firmly.

"You should be at home," said Mrs. Grace, with all the charm her genteel, South-Georgia self could muster but in the voice she used when she expected to be obeyed, which I'm sure made her whole household step-and-fetch. Mrs. Grace, very ill herself, had gone to great lengths to be there.

And you should do what Hemosapien tells you to do," said Neil Earth-Planter and Johnny D., both two-time cancer survivors and close friends.

"You don't need any complications that, should they not kill you, eat up all your annual insurance limit," said Carolyn, a cancer patient and clinic office manager, trying to help me stay out of a jam as they have done there so many times before.

Rick, Jack, Harrell, Phillip, Mike and Jimmy all silently nodded in agreement.

"So this is sort of like an intervention a caring group has with a chemically dependent friend or family member?" I said more than asked.

"Similar," said Hemosapien, "except your dependence is your independence."

"And why would you trade your leukemia remission for a possible death-by-numerous and/or various types of infections on a trip to a bad cafeteria?" asked and admonished Dr. Cecil?

I looked at the even more unappetizing food on my plate. I looked at the friends and caregivers all around. While pondering this, Hemosapien's cell phone rang.

He answered it, said a couple of brief words, and then handed it to me.

It was Gooday on the other end.

"Go straight home," he said. "Do not pass GO; do not collect \$200." It was an order, not a request. I looked at Hemosapien. He nodded. I looked at Dr. Cecil. He nodded, scowled, and nodded, again. Everyone was nodding.

The phone went dead and I handed it back to Hemosapien.

I thanked them all for their candor, their caring, and their courage to demonstrate it so. There was nothing left to say. I got up and headed to the door.

Approaching the door simultaneously was sneezing-woman. I raced to the door to get there ahead of her, opened it wide, and she walked through like a queen headed for her carriage, nodding to me as that same queen would to her footman as she did so.

"My pleasure, ma'am!" I said with a smile, more to myself than to her because I had prevented her from touching that door handle with that same, sneeze-catching hand.

Perhaps she thought I was gallant. Perhaps she thought it was her right to have the door opened for her. Perhaps she thought I was an anachronism from an age when men still did things like that for women. She'd be right if she thought that.

She'd also be right if she were the jaded type of woman, thinking that men always have an ulterior motive in their actions towards women. She'd be right, of course, about me and an ulterior motive, but she'd miss by a country mile the motivation.

I laugh at the irony of that all the way home, my unsterile but warm and inviting Mississippi home.

3/07/10 Neutropeeney-Meany

That's how I feel when I can't shake hands. Not shaking hands is so UNLIKE me!

Folks have been checking on me. I am delighted when they do. My friend Frank in Memphis, to whom you have been previously introduced, called a couple of times and left me a message. I sent him this e-mail, which brought him, and now you, up to speed.

Dear Frank:

*Thanks for your call. Your checking on me is very much appreciated.
I'd call you this morning because:*

- 1. Dermatologists probably don't pre-schedule any surgeries on Fridays.*
- 2. Dermatologists probably don't work at all on Fridays.*

But if 1 and 2 are incorrect

- 3. You might be enjoying a bit of sleep*
- 4. In the middle of a surgical procedure*

Of course, I could be completely wrong about all this.

My oncologist's group not only does not work on Friday's, but during hunting season, they also do not work on Thursdays, except for whoever was on call. Hemosapien, being the most recent doctor to join the group, seems to get stuck with being on-call more than his fair share of weekends. When I mentioned this to him, he sort of frowned. I think I struck a nerve. I have come to love and respect him enormously. He ALWAYS comes to check on me when I am in chemo, or just there for lab-work, though he is not required to do so. He certainly looks after me.

I seem to be a celebrity at the chemo clinic, EVERYONE there says hello to me by name: the clerks, the phlebotomists, the nurses, the doctors, the insurance people, the business office people -- everyone.

At mid-point during my chemo course, a bone-marrow biopsy and flow cytometry failed to reveal any evidence of CLL in my bone marrow. That is a complete response. I am in the 60% category of people who have a complete response to their first treatment with FCR. They say the CLL is still there, just not detectable. I have had 3 more rounds of chemo SINCE that biopsy, so the CLL should be whipped down even more. The biopsy at BATCC later this month will reveal whatever it will reveal.

If I follow the numbers and am the median, some of the prognosticators for me not being favorable (IgVH Unmutated, Zap70 Positive, CD38 Positive), the Cll will remanifest itself in 2 to 5 years and I will need retreatment. My chances then are much greater for only a PARTIAL response and significantly diminished for a COMPLETE response, and so on into the future, diminishing until I am completely refractory (2 years, 5 years, ten years, twenty years?). If I am not the median, they might see me sooner. They could also see me late—much, much, much later, and then again, NEVER.

It is what it is. I no longer worry about it. If I do worry about it, I write about it, and the worry disappears in the words, or at least the perspective changes with the words—either way is good for me. The exact median, with my prognostic factors, says that I can expect 7 to 10 more years, based on the current treatment methods. A lot of other things can kill a fellow in 7 to 10 years.

I have learned with cancer, there is nothing TYPICAL. My body is ME, and My cancer is MY cancer. My response to treatment is MY response to treatment. If I had a magic wand with a limited amount of magic, I have most definitely been introduced to others I'd run the risk to use it on FIRST, gladly.

They are turning out monoclonal antibodies now very quickly. These are remarkable drugs. I think the next generation that comes out will possibly use my own cells instead of cells grown in mice, then they'll work more like vaccines. Gooday is one of the world's leading experts on CLL. He said that if I need retreatment a couple of years from now, I can fully expect it not have any resemblance to the treatment I have just received. The things they are working on are curative not palliative.

Isn't that good news?

I hope you and your bride are doing well, and I'll plan on seeing you, soon!

If it's OK with you, I will post this e-mail (real names edited to my blog standard).

Highest and best regards.

Chris

My friend Ed Dye promptly lost a brief, violent struggle with cancer last year. Ed's passing left a hole that can never be filled in so many lives.

One of Ed's favorite artists was a black gospel singer who recorded in the 1920's, Washington Phillips. Ed's favorite Washing Phillips song was "*What Are They Doing in Heaven Today?*" I wonder what Ed Dye is doing in heaven today. As Washington Phillips said, "I don't know, but it's my job to stay right here and sing about it!" Like Washington, I'm planning on staying and singing.

We performed this song on The Sucarnochee Revue last Friday night, March 5, 2010. This is for Ed Dye, his family and friends, and for everyone who lost their battle, or loved someone who lost their battle with cancer.

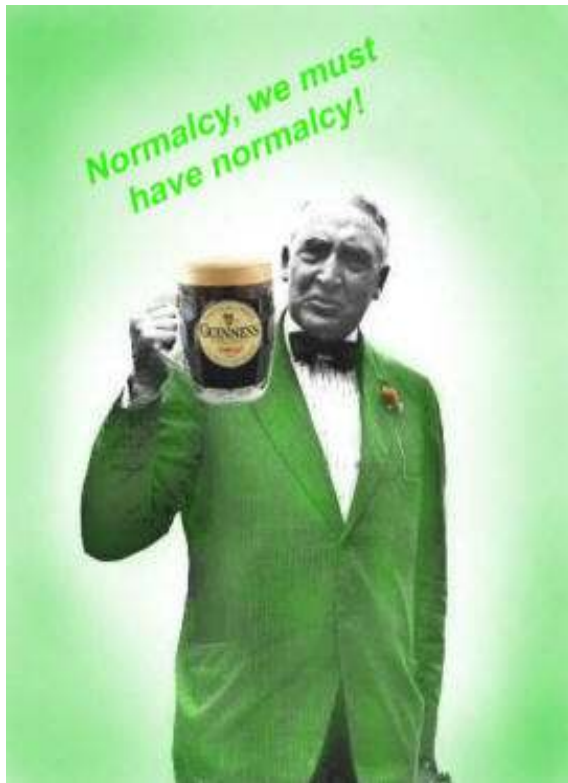
Here it is:

You can read the YouTube comments if you'd like. I botched the intro to this song in the WORST way. This song is in 3/4 time. I started it off and sang the first line in 4/4 time and IT WAS NOT WORKING. I was in panic mode. My mind was racing, and I'm sure my blood pressure was off the scale. I had to fix this, somehow, and fix it suddenly and dramatically. I managed to pull it off with the help of a superb, professional band. Thanks, guys for making me look good. I salute you, each and every one.

Looking at the video, it does not appear that I was in a panic, but I assure you I was. Should I get some sort of award for my musical performance that night? Naw! But someone should certainly nominate me for some sort of award for ACTING! The ACT was the best part of my performance.

This is a powerful song. It will speak to your heart, not because of me, but because of the anointed words of Washington Phillips. Washington managed to pull off this thing I find MOST admirable in a song: that it is mournful and joyful at the same time.

3/17/10 A Return to Normalcy . . . Whatever That Is



"A Return to Normalcy" was the campaign slogan of Warren G. Harding in the 1920 presidential election. Progressives Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson were gone from the scene, WW1 was over, and now it was time to get back to business as usual., which was business . . . with the taint of corruption.

Harding, during his campaign which led to his landslide election, made a famous speech in which he said, "America's present need is not heroics but healing; not nostrums but normalcy; not revolution but restoration . . . not surgery, but serenity." That sounds like something a Republican candidate might easily say right now, because normalcy is not what we have in the executive or legislative branch, but an odd, grotesque Kabuki dance between an executive branch and a legislative branch that are of the same party who cannot seem to get anything done other than point at their opposition and accuse them of being obstructionists when there are not enough of them in town to stop anything the party in power makes up its mind to do. If this were not so insulting, I would find it amusing.

If Harding were here today, and running for president, I'd probably buy in to his platform and vote for him. The nostalgia of a return to normalcy (or the GOOD OLD DAYS) is always alluring to us. However, the good old days are always an unattainable illusion. They are the carrot dangled before the mule. The mule will pull harder and harder as the plow bites deeper into the earth, but the carrot just stays slightly ahead, always out of reach . . . the mule unknowingly pulling, sweating, grunting, farting, and the carrot cleverly placed to wiggle just before his nose; its smell in his nostrils and its orange delightfulness just out of reach of his tongue and teeth. The good old days no longer exist; there is only now.

In the good old days, I didn't have leukemia. In the good old days, I did not have to deal with chemotherapy, oncologists, insurance, lab work, flow cytometry, bone marrow biopsies, phlebotomists, radiologists, big medical bills, nausea, Hemosapien, Gooday, BATCC, or sit in cancer clinics pondering others who were much more ill than me. In the good old days, only other people had illnesses like this. In the good old days, there was peace, health, prosperity and plenty. How I long for the good old days!

Yet, if I dwell on this, I am dwelling on what I have perceived as loss and failing to dwell on and be thankful for what it is that I have. I am wasting my life on remorse by failing to live in gratitude. Neil-Earth planter told me not to do this and he is one who has traveled this path ahead of me, leading the way. It was good advice. I have chosen to see things this way.

Remorse? We all have it! It is a thing to be recognized, pondered on briefly, extract from it the valuable lessons on how we might conduct ourselves in the future in similar circumstances to avoid having remorse afterwards; then to be shelved and filed away, perhaps for future reference. To have it constantly in front of us would be to place too much value on something

worthless for any purpose other than the one described above. This is easier to talk about than to do.

My blood has decided, for the time being, to have itself its own return to normalcy, for which I am truly thankful. My neutrophils have come up to levels that, while not yet within the normal range, are near enough that I no longer have to be a neutropeeney-meany. That makes me feel better. I am still a reckless hand washer, though. There are still things lurking that, though seemingly innocuous, would invade, complicate and destroy. I am not fearful of those things, but I am cautious.

Normalcy? I am thankful for it. I'd like to have more of it in my body. If you could buy it at the dollar store, I'd stock up on it and use it liberally when things would get out of whack.

"Debbie, things are just going crazy around here. The washing machine is broken, the sink faucet's leaking under the counter, the upstairs toilet is stopped up, there's a bad bulge on your left front tire, the dogs got into the garbage . . . and, oh, my leukemia has come back," I might say one day.

"Don't you still have some of that new and improved Normalcy you bought at Dollar General a few years back, before they stopped making it?" she might ask.

"Yes, but I can't seem to locate it," I'd reply, "else I'd have some in a spray duster and be dusting it all round the house right now. I can't remember where I stored it. Have you seen it?"

"The last time I actually saw it was back in the good old days," she might say.

"Boy, the good old days have claimed a lot of things. Once things get lost there, they never resurface," I might muse to myself.

Normalcy? I would like to have some in my politics, too, please! There is nothing new going on here. The return to normalcy was a cry against big-government progressivism ninety years ago. Any day now, I expect to hear this term being used in some conservative arena as a novel new approach. I will laugh out loud when this is suggested.

History belongs to all of us. We should use it more: not to be sullen about the loss of the good old days, but to help us make choices that avoid the mistakes others made as they were sojourning through this life viewing through that clouded, dark glass.

Debbie and I are off to Houston, BATCC and Goodday on March 29, for a final checkout on this course of chemo. I will have another bone marrow biopsy. It will be my first at BATCC. We will see how their technique stacks up with Hemosapien's. They have a separate clinic just for this. I'm sure the people who do them at BATCC do them all day long every day. They should be outstanding at it. Regrettably, I cannot take a pistol with me there. They have a metal detector you have to pass through to get inside the building. I suppose others who have had bone marrow biopsies done there in the past were the harbingers of this precaution.

I will keep you posted.

By the way, happy birthday Lisa and Amanda (both former co-workers). I am sorry we have lost touch.

To the rest of you, a Happy St. Paddy's Day!

3/18/10 Watch and Wait? The New Normacly?”

Nothing is so wretched or foolish as to anticipate misfortunes. What madness it is to be expecting evil before it comes.

Seneca (Lucius Annaeus, the Younger. 4 BC - 65 AD)

Lucius Annaeus Seneca (Seneca the Younger) was a Roman Stoic philosopher and statesman. He was full of wise sayings. He was also a tutor to the young Nero. He continuously ran afoul of Roman emperors, first Caligula, and then Claudius, and ultimately his former pupil, Nero himself. Accused in a conspiracy to assassinate Nero, the charge of which he may have been innocent, he was ordered by Nero to commit suicide.



It's not hard to see how a truthful, rational, outspoken man, who was in the public's eye might run afoul of Caligula and Nero, each of them filled with his own madness. Claudius was a better emperor, though not without his flaws. He was apparently afflicted with some sort of physical infirmity, which led to his being passed over for emperor in favor of his nephew, Caligula. After Caligula's death, he was chosen emperor. Seneca was too young to run afoul of Augustus (the first real emperor), and perhaps simply not ready to step-up to the political pundit plate for his turn at bat during the reign of Tiberias (the second). Perhaps Caligula's excesses triggered something in Seneca so that he could no longer be silent. If Seneca had difficulties with Tiberias, they have not been recorded for us.

It was a dangerous time to be a Roman emperor. In fact, there seems to have been few safe times to have been a Roman Emperor. If one were applying for a life insurance policy and on the application form, under "CURRENT EMPLOYMENT," listed "Roman Emperor," one might find that there were no willing insurers. It was a dangerous job. Only the emperors who ruthlessly removed all challengers managed to die of natural causes. Many evils went with this job; but what man could resist the imperial crown when it was dangled before him? George Washington is the only one I can think of!

Of the many, many things Seneca wrote, the above quote is the one that caught me today. If my trip to Texas and BATCC reveals that no further attention is necessary, then I will return to **Watch and Wait** status, which we have previously interpreted as **Watch and Worry**!

I cannot allow **Watch and Wait** to turn in to **Watch and Worry**! If I allow it, I will be participating in the wretchedly foolish madness of expecting evil misfortunes before they come. Yet, here I am, worrying about whether to worry about **Watch and Wait** when I haven't even been put back on **Watch and Wait** status by those who are the keepers of one's status. The verdict: Guilty!

Seneca also said this: **A person's fears are lighter when the danger is at hand.**

He also said this: **A man who suffers before it is necessary, suffers more than is necessary.**

He also said this: ***Life, if lived well, is long enough.***

That gives one lots to think about. The danger at hand requires us to DO something and the DOING requires our minds to be occupied in a different way than a vague worrying over dangers that are lurking, but presently just imagined. If allowed to become the focus of our attention, the danger lurking in the future's shadow is a nag that robs us of our present, which is our only REAL possession. If I allow this to worry me, my worry can turn to suffering, and I needlessly suffer before it is necessary. Seneca's offering of the well-lived life being long enough is a harder meal to digest. Upon reflection of all the talented people we know of who died in their youth, this seems difficult to reconcile. Death has cheated us all of the benefits and talents of others. However, it's obverse is easier to digest. Why would anyone want to cling to a bad, lengthy life, other than fear? It would be far easier to reject the thought that a life badly-lived is never long enough. That makes no sense, yet still does not make the original easier to chew: The more I chew, the larger it gets in my mouth, sort of like liver (I can't eat it, but it's GOOD for me therefore I MUST get it down!).

Old Seneca also said this: ***I will govern my whole life and thoughts as if the whole world were to see the one and read the other, for what does it signify to make anything a secret to my neighbor, when to God, who is the searcher of our hearts, all our privacies are open?***

That is how we should all hope to govern our lives. I know that it is easier to govern my actions than my thoughts, but it is recorded that someone wiser than Seneca also said that what's in the heart proceeds out the mouth. Our thoughts become our actions. The thought becomes the deed, for what evil deed was ever done without the seed sprouting and being nurtured our heart? It has its beginnings in soft, secret whisperings and rustles.

Someone wiser than Seneca also once said: ***Sufficient for today is the evil thereof, therefore take no thought of tomorrow.***

Watch and Wait? Today I am going to watch what I think about. Today, I am going to wait until the fresh coffee gets through brewing and then I think I'm going to have another cup. I think I will immediately remind some precious people of how much I love them. I think I'll go and wake up my sleeping-in son, just returned late last evening from a spring-break trip to the beach, muss his hair with a dry-shave and threaten him with yard-work, and then tell him I was just kidding and to go back to sleep. I will watch the sun shine. I will watch the Dogwoods in the act of blooming. I will have to wait on the Redbud trees, which are just now budding, to explode in their glorious arrays of scarlet. I will watch until then, thinking about them, though they will manage to successfully bloom without a single thought from me.

Seneca? From what I can read, he walked the walk. His outspoken search for truth kept him in trouble with the authorities, ultimately resulting in his death. A well-lived life! Seneca would say that it was long enough!

3/28/10 BATCC Beckoning

Debbie and I traveled all day from home to Houston. We were going to leave yesterday, but I just ran out of steam. We are here, now. Staying at the hotel that is part of the Big As Texas Cancer Center (BATCC). Everyone is so nice here. You may recall from a previous installment, I was the one who behaved like a jack-ass to the parking attendant, but later apologized. Go back and look at the photo. It is funny.

We stopped at Papadeaux's Restaurant in Beaumont, Texas, on the way. We ate our fill of boiled crawfish and I had Three (yes, three) fried soft-shell crabs. They were Texas-sized crabs, as large as a tennis shoe, but I ate all three successfully. Fried soft-shell crabs are my favorite thing in the whole world. Debbie doesn't like them. To my palette, they have a richness that surpasses anything else, except for perhaps a well prepared and labored over crawfish bisque (which I can make excellently!) It was a delightful stop in a nice place with a good atmosphere and just what I was looking for in food. If one is watching one's cholesterol, one might want to avoid the shellfish. To me, shellfish is what good seafood is all about. I sure ate my fill.

I go to the Fast-Track Lab tomorrow morning at 7:30 for blood work, then off to see Gooday at 9:00AM. I see from my appointment schedule that I do not have my bone marrow biopsy until tomorrow at 4:00PM. I suppose I will be through after then. They will not get anything done on it that late in the evening. Gooday or Nurse Susan will let me know the results, but we'll see. I am looking forward to seeing Gooday, Nurse Susan, and Nurse Alice.

In the meantime, Debbie and I have decided that we will spend tomorrow night and head back on Tuesday and see what kind of shape Canaan has the house in. I'm sure all his buddies were over today and they were having big time. Last time we came here, he got his sister, Piper, to clean up for him. Piper is on spring break, so she will probably be tapped by her charming little brother to do this again. Debbie and I have a wager on it; we'll see.

In the meantime, I am thankful for a safe trip here. A beautiful day for a drive, even a long one; a nice hotel room with WiFi so I can update my blog, and a world class medical facility right across the street, where they have my name recorded and are waiting to see me - - not too shabby for a country boy.

We'll also see if Gooday returns me to the New Normalcy!

3/29/10 So Far So Good

This morning, I went to BATCC's Fast Track Lab for blood work and vital signs, then off to see the extremely competent Nurse Practitioner Alice, to whom you have previously been introduced. As you may recall, I have seldom encountered such competence in a person. She actually listens! She asks you questions and then she digests the answers; a delightful response. You feel special in her presence. I still maintain that she has the touch of a healer; a wonderful characteristic that will serve her well.

After she examined me, Gooday came right in with hugs all around. He said I will not hear results from my bone marrow biopsy for a few days. It is scheduled for later this afternoon, but that it was fully expected to show no evidence of disease like the last one I had in November. All my blood numbers looked good. Barring any unforeseen complications, he wants to see me back in 6 months, but wants the results of blood tests for the next two months.

Nurse Susan indicated that Hemosapien's office had not been forwarding blood test reports as they were supposed to. She had nothing back to September. I will send them to her myself when I get back home, then ask Hemosapien why this has not been done.

So far, so good!

They all know me here, too. It seems that writing the blog has been a good thing. They get to see what a patient is really thinking. Hemosapien and Gooday have both told me this. So did Nurse Alice.

It has sure been good for me!

The late, great Jim Valvano said, "Cancer can take away all of my physical abilities. It cannot touch my mind, it cannot touch my heart, and it cannot touch my soul!"

He was a great motivational speaker, the best one I EVER heard, having had the opportunity to hear him in person shortly after NC State won the Final Four National Championship. Cancer claimed him, as it claims so many. Hemosapien, Gooday, Nurse Alice, Nurse Jessica, Nurse Coy, Nurse Susan, and so many others have the job of stopping cancer from claiming our physical abilities. They do the best they can. We are soothed and comforted by their physical touch, but sometimes they are not successful. When this happens, they are not unmoved by this. They are trained to maintain a sense of clinical detachment; they have to be, else their jobs would be too depressing, but they are pieces of the continent, parts of the main, and in the long run, we all know for whom the bell tolls...

It is up to us to live the words of Jim Valvano in spite of what our circumstances seem to be telling us. In any way one can examine his life, he was victorious, right up to the very end when he scored his ultimate victory. None of us pass completely through this life alive; we are just alive until the moment we cease living. It is how we live this life and then meet our end that will define our existence here. What comes after cannot be measured except through our faith, though we have glimpses. We will all see it soon enough. How shall we greet our life, today?? That is the question we must deal with when we awake every morning.

Back in August I said this:

***So many stories
On masked faces valiant eyes
Peer back like mirrors***

This came hauntingly back to me today, powerful and poignant. At this place, it is inescapable, and greets you at every turn. One is never really prepared for it.

Gooday said that he had just returned from Prague, yesterday, where he was the keynote speaker for a group of over 1,000 Hematologists and Oncologists from all over the world. That the FCR chemotherapy had become the standard treatment around the world for Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia. There was as yet no median survival or overall time for remaining disease free, because since they started the protocol 11.5 years ago, there were still folks who were alive and disease free. He said I was in a fortunate class that had gone into full remission just halfway through the chemo course. The bone marrow biopsy will reveal what it will reveal, though. The future will hold what it will hold. I am in the Lord's hands. Today has to be enough . . . today is all we have.

I also said this just a few days ago. Why would my memory be so short as to forget it?

Nothing is so wretched or foolish as to anticipate misfortunes.

What madness it is to be expecting evil before it comes.

Seneca (Lucius Annaeus, the Younger. 4 BC –

65 AD)

Thank you Nurse Alice, for your healing touch!

They all know me here, too. It seems that writing the blog has been a good thing. They get to see what a patient is really thinking. Hemosapien and Gooday have both told me this. So did Nurse Alice. It has sure been good for me!

My bone marrow biopsy (BMB) was scheduled for 4:00PM. Nurse Susan, knowing that I would be sitting around all day just waiting for that appointment apparently got it moved up. I got a phone call from the BMB department just before 3:00PM.

"Mr. Sharp," said the lady on the other end of the phone, "We were told that you were just hanging out waiting for your appointment, but if you can come now, we can work you right in!"

I thanked her, took TWO of the 10mg valiums I had with me just for this purpose and headed right on over to the 10th floor. I checked in and the young lady put an arm bracelet on me. I went to sit in the waiting area. When I looked down at my armband, It said JAY SHARP, Patient number 882XXX. That was definitely not me. I went back to the counter and told the lady that this was not me. She turned a whiter shade of pale and began rifling through the papers on he desk.

"Oh my goodness, we have two patients here today named Sharp!" she exclaimed.

"I am obviously the other one." I said. For a moment I thought that she might argue with me, but that was just me recalling how on a previous trip they had me listed as a FEMALE, and questioned me at length about whether I was sure I was a male and not actually female. I offered to prove it on the spot but they declined. Nurse Susan got this straightened out for me.

I confirmed my patient number as the young lady looked through the papers again. She cut off the old bracelet and put on the correct one.

"I'm glad you noticed that," she said.

"So am I," I replied.

Now I don't know Jay Sharp, and he doesn't know me, but for a moment there, we were almost tied together in what could have been an extremely complicated manner. I don't know what kind of cancer he has, or what stage it is in, or if he has cancer at all, they just perhaps

suspecting he might. But had my BMB results been put in his file, they might have mistakenly thought that he had had a miraculous recovery, or, not yet knowing what my results will reveal, that he had suddenly had a turn for the worse.

Had they put the results of HIS BMB in MY file, they might have been calling me while I was on the way back home telling me, "Mr. Sharp, things have gone terribly wrong. You must come back right away."

Confusion would have reigned in BOTH our cases, until we had more expensive tests run, sorting things out; and me full of belligerence, arms flailing about and using the most colorful language.

It pays to be observant since it is OUR health care and OUR bodies. I am not complaining about this. I'm sure they would have caught it before they actually did the procedure, since they confirm your name and patient number before they do anything, but I might have saved that young lady some grief from her bosses.

Jay Sharp, as I said before, I don't know you, but I do know that you were there the same time as me for a BMB, which means that you have cancer and are being treated for it, or they think you have cancer and are confirming its nature in your body. Here's my wish for you, since we were nearly closely connected: May the cancer in your body just vanish for reasons no medical professional can comprehend, and may you live a long, healthy, rewarding, joyful, and prosperous life, surrounded by the family and friends that love you and cherish your every breath, and be an inspiration and guiding light for all those you encounter in this adventure we call life, and develop and maintain a close, personal relationship with your Creator, apart from whom no happiness can exist. I cannot wish you any more than that. There is no where to go from there. It is all I have in me to wish; but it is yours.

Reflecting on this, I heard my name called out from two doors down. Physicians Assistant Katie was calling me back. In dread, like a man walking to the gallows I sauntered over to where she was waiting.

"Why the long face?" she asked.

"This is not my first time for a BMB," I said.

"Oh? But it's your first time here!" she said.

"Yes."

"Well come on back," she said, pointing to a procedure room.

The first thing she did was to confirm who I was. We had it right this time. Then she took my blood pressure.

"Your blood pressure is a little high," she exclaimed, alarmed it seemed.

"Well I'm about to have a BMB," I said, "Tense as an over-inflated bicycle tire, why wouldn't it be?"

"That's certainly a reason for it to be up."

She prepared me while another lady presented me with the consent forms which I had to sign. I signed them, and PA Katie got down to business. She explained the local anesthetic I would be getting and proceeded to administer it. The sting of the injection, sharp and pointed, was nothing, I knew, to what would come after.

After the local took effect, she went to work, occasionally asking me about the pain. Was it sharp? Was it dull ache? Was it just pressure? When I winced, she said that she would look for

another spot. I learned from her that there is a narrow area where the local does the most good on the bone itself. The skin would be completely numb over a much larger area, but below, the target was much smaller. She shopped around (I'm sure 'shopped around' is not the right way to describe this, but I am a layman!) until she found the spot that was more dull than sharp. Then she got the gemshidi (remember that??? It's the evil tool they use to pierce the bone and get the marrow out!!!) and went to work. She was surprised that I knew the names of the instruments she was using. The other lady in the room asked me if I was a physician myself since I seemed to know so much about this. I told her no, but I sure was an experienced layperson. They all agreed with that.

I did feel a couple of sharp twinges of pain, but I could tell I was in the hands of a real pro. She laughed when I told her that I had decided that since old women and children had these, I could endure it without whining. She asked was it painful. When I said yes, she said she could try another spot, but I told her that since she was in there, just to get it over with. I would endure. She also explained that YOUNG men were the worst whiners. She said old women and women in general endured it very well. Old men endured it well, but less well than the women.

"Are you daring to place me in the category of the OLD MEN?" I asked.

Laughing, she said, "No, but you sure are enduring it better than the young men, all of whom seemed to be the worst cry-babies."

I found comfort in the midst of pain in that.

After it was over she asked, "Well, how was it?"

"As intense as a root canal," I replied, "but not lasting nearly as long!"

"I'll accept that," she said with a smile.

Then she took my blood pressure again, declaring, "It's even higher now!"

"Well, I just had a BMB? What did you expect. I'm all tense and worked up, even though it's over. And with the early call, the two valiums that I took haven't really kicked in yet. No telling how high it would be if it weren't for them," I said.

Incredulously she asked, "You mean you took TWO valiums before you came in here? You should have told me that!"

"I just did," I said.

"I mean before," she retorted.

"Not a chance! That was my little secret!"

I gave her my card and told her about my blog and invited her to read it, since she would be appearing in it soon. She no doubt does not think that she will be making an appearance the very same day. Won't she be surprised?

Physicians Assistant Katie, your competence and professionalism rates right up there with Nurse Practitioner Alice, whom we discussed (amicably) and for whom we agreed that we had the highest respect. I cannot think of a greater compliment that I can pay to you. From the moment I entered your domain, you made it clear in a disarming way that you were in charge. While relinquishing control is not in my nature, your easy self-assurance made it easy for me. Is it possible for one to enjoy a bone marrow aspiration? No, not really. But I enjoyed this one as much as a person can. Did I enjoy being served by you? The answer to that is a resounding, "YES!"

Is my arse sore? Yep! Did I walk some to keep the soreness down like you told me to? Nope. About the time I was on the way back across the breezeway to the hotel the two valiums kicked in full time. I told you I didn't take them early enough. My wife laughed at me. I laugh at myself. Thank you for your competence. May you serve each and every one of your patients with the confidence, competence and care that you showed me. You were in charge and I enjoyed abandoning myself to it!

While I am operating under this truth serum called diazepam, let me candidly state the following: to Hemosapien, Nurse Jessica, Nurse Juanita, Nurse Marilyn, Nurse Dana, Nurse Practitioner Alice, Gooday, Nurse Abby, Physicians Assistant Katie, Phlebotomist Barbara and her colleagues, Business Manager Carolyn, Mainmost, Nurse Casey, Respiratory Therapist David, Nurse Sandra, and Nurse Scotty, and all the un-named and unknown health care practitioners and support people who have so actively been involved in my health care - - - THANK YOU for your competence, care and support.

I fear now that the great health-care unknown into which we are now entering will move some of you beyond my reach and supplant them with government bureaucrats and those who cold care less about competent health care, and care far more about the positions they occupy and how they can get away with doing as little as possible. I have received the best health care that money can buy (or that insurance money can buy) and I have fought tooth and nail to conserve every dollar of it. Many of you have helped me do so. I have worked hard to get this health care, and will work harder to keep it.

My very persistent nature has alienated me from some health care relationships, and endangered others, but to some I have been joined with a cement that cannot separated by any pressure or force, other than perhaps the gross monstrosity of an unwieldy piece of legislation whose framers don't fully understand its import. The politically elite tell me that I am not smart enough to understand it; that they must interpret it properly for me. I shudder at the very thought of the restrictions this will impose on you, me, and our relationship. Time will tell if this was the right thing, but already I am hearing rumblings of competent physicians who are saying that they are thinking of an early retirement.

Lord, protect us from those who would inflict confusion on us and tell us it is for our own good. It has been said that the worst tyranny that can be inflicted on a people is that which is for their own good! I fear this is where we are headed! Those who believe in the benevolence of governments would do well to study the history of governments more closely.

In the meantime, I salute you all! May God richly bless you all in your efforts to serve those who come to you in their need, and may He give you the vision to see clearly those things which need to be done, the determination and decision with which to see them completed, and His healing touch manifest itself through your hands!

4/8/10 The News from Texas

The news from Texas, according to the Texas Travel Bureau, is that "it's a whole other country". They are right. What a wonderful dichotomy is the Lone Star State! Texas, I salute you. From your Gulf of Mexico beaches and seafood (Oh, My! The Seafood!!!), to your mountainous deserts, to your prairies, to your Eastern Timberlands, to your world class cities, and world class medical research and treatment: SALUDO!

I received this e-mail from Nurse Susan at BATCC:

Sorry to hear your bone marrow biopsy gave you problems. . .

. . . The flow cytometry [and] the bone marrow report all look great.

Congratulations!!! Live well and enjoy life and yes we want to see you in 6 months, then yearly. Thank you for being my patient!! I have printed this and will fax to Hemosapien.

And following that was the complete flow cytometry report from the Bone Marrow Biopsy (BMB) performed by PA (Physicians Assistant) Katie. I bragged on the skill and "in-charge-ness" of PA Katie earlier. I am still bragging on her, however I did experience a few complications with the BMB, and still am! I think this is more in the nature of the procedure than in particular the skill of PA Katie, who does BMBs all the time.

The spot on the left side of my pelvis where PA Katie so intimately inserted her [*gemshidi*](#) (apparently spelled JAMSHIDI, and is the medieval instrument of torture with which they penetrate the bone and suck out the bone marrow) is as sore as if it were penetrated by a round of #00 buckshot. Now that may be an exaggeration, and surely pure speculation, since I have never had a round of #00 buck hit me in the hip bone, but this is the first time I have had this to be so sore this long.

Since I explained to Hemosapien on my follow-up visit with him on Monday, April 5, that I had started running a low grade fever on the previous Thursday, which continued through Easter Sunday, and during the whole time I felt simply awful, further indicating that my wife said my hip looked red and puffy near the side of the biopsy, he said that I had no doubt had a low grade infection from it. Of course, for a CLL patient that is somewhat [leukopenic](#) and [neutropenic](#), this can be disastrous.

Throughout the whole course of my chemo, Hemosapien had me taking Bactrim (an antibiotic) three days a week as a prophylactic (which BATCC said they never did) so I began taking it every day after it became apparent (to me) that I had an infection. Hemosapien said that if I had called him, this is what he would have told me to do, anyway, unless my fever got too high. In my case, it hovered around 100°F, which was below any threshold previously cited to me as dangerous. I sure did feel bad, though. I did not even go to church on Easter Sunday. I slept and slept. My son was sent from the lodge to wake me up to tell me Easter Dinner was being served and to come eat. When I ambled groggily down the hill, there, at the table, sat my whole family. I sat down with them, ate a bit, and begged their forgiveness and excuse as I headed back up the hill to the house and went back to sleep. I slept on the sofa the entire day, off and on. I officially got in the bed at 6:00PM, and slept until 4:00AM. That was 10 hours. I probably needed that sleep as much as I needed anything! I am so thankful for it.

I still think highly of PA Katie. BMBs are risky, that is why EVERYONE makes you sign those forms that state that you understand the risks and complications that may develop as a result of the BMB. I just had a complication of which I was already aware. Of course, DEATH, is a

complication of which I was also aware, so comparatively speaking, a low grade infection is not too shabby. The buckshot sore hip is a real pain in the ass, though! (I laugh at myself!)

Speaking of buckshot, my freeing Buckshot Steve, to whom you have been previously introduced, is having a hard time right now with his CLL. He can't seem to get his blood counts right and goes from neutropenia to hemolytic anemia and then back again. Both of these can be severe complications. He is in good hands though. He gave me the name of his doctor and I checked him out. I'm sure that Buckshot Steve is glad that I approve of his doctor; and I am sure that his doctor will be absolutely beside himself, overcome with joy and sublime emotion, when he learns that he has met with my approval. I don't know how he could have a successful medical practice and also serve as a professor at a large, large Southern medical school without having previously had this approval, his medical training at Johns Hopkins University Hospital and Medical School (one of the world's leading medical institutions), notwithstanding. I am sure he will be an even better and more competent doctor now that he has my approval. He will wake up every morning feeling better about himself. I just hope he wakes up every morning and thinks, "There are those out there that love Buckshot Steve and want him to get better right away, so let me take the extra step, make that extra consultation, and be extra successful in choosing the right course of treatment for Buckshot Steve!"

"You know, Dr. Gator-Professor, Mississippi Chris has approved of your medical practice and the way you are treating me, based on what I was successfully able to communicate to him of what I understand about what you told me about how you are planning on treating my current complications," Buckshot Steve might say to Dr. Gator-Professor.

Dr. Gator-Professor might then say, "And may I ask, just who is this Mississippi Chris?"

Buckshot might say, "He is a non-famous musician living in complete impecunious obscurity in East Mississippi who also has CLL."

Dr. Gator-Professor then might ask, "A good question might be how does that qualify him to make any judgments about my ability or authority to practice hematology and oncology, since he has no such training?"

Buckshot might indicate, "Well, he plays a pretty good banjo, has studied an awful lot about CLL on his own, and indicated that he has recently stayed in a Holiday Inn Express."

Dr. Gator-Professor might then say, "Well then, I am assured that my personal insecurities as a physician are all unfounded, thus I will be able to treat you more effectively knowing that I have the approval of this Renaissance-man, medical/hematological/oncological/banjo expert from rural East Mississippi, though the connection between banjo playing and hematology/oncology are unclear to me at the moment!"

And he might additionally ask, "By the way, who is the Hematologist of this Mississippi Chris who lives in the rural East Mississippi utopia of oncology-knowledge-by-banjo-osmosis?"

Buckshot would then say, "Hemosapien is his name."

Dr. Gator-Professor might very well say, "I'll be sure to put him on the prayer list at my church."

Buckshot would say, "I know Mississippi Chris will appreciate that."

Dr. Gator-Professor would remark, "I was referring to Hemosapien!"

Buckshot, eyebrows raised would exclaim, "OH!," slurring and stretching the single syllable word into about five syllables, which with the raised eyebrows, said more than a hundred individual words could possibly convey.

Dr. Gator-Professor might then add, "If this Hemosapien has a patient like that, he's the one who needs the prayer."

Buckshot would reply, "You may have a point, there!"

Dr. Gator-Professor, might then ask, one of his own eyebrows raised, the other forced down and his head turned slightly askew, peering at Buckshot with his left eye over the top of his glasses, "This Mississippi Chris Onco/Hemo/Banjo-oligist hasn't put any funny ideas in your head, has he?"

Buckshot would then reply, "No sir, carry on!. Just know that I want to get better, and SOON! I've got a new grandbaby I want to spend some time with."

Dr. Gator-Professor would then promise, "I will leave no stone unturned so that you may be a doting grandfather for a long, long time!"

And from there, I will leave that conversation to the real participants, me being just an interloper and an inserter of fictitious words into the mouths of others. It is the one trait I have that helps prevent my total obscurity.

As for me? I received the results of my BMB and last week's visit to BATCC yesterday. This is what Vishinaihadderdrinkov Guttenuauldfashunkindervisky, MD, MMDD (that stands for double-doctor) PhD, DDS, DMD, PharmD, ThD, DD, LLD, JD, BA, BS, CPA, CFP, CLSW, FACS, CLU, EMT, CRT, 33° F&AM, PE, RLS, Ed.D, DVM, et. al., (More letters after his name than you can put on a double-spaced typed page), the pathologist at BATCC who reviewed my BMB:

BM CLINICAL INTERP:

Specimen is Bone Marrow LEFT

Interpretation: No residual chronic lymphocytic leukemia/small Lymphocytic lymphoma identified, using a standardized protocol for detection of minimal residual disease.

Now THAT, my friends, is good news. If the is cancer still there, Vishinaihadderdrinkov Guttenuauldfashunkindervisky, MD, MMDD, PhD, DDS, DMD, PharmD, ThD, DD, LLD, JD, BA, BS, CPA, CFP, CLSW, FACS, CLU, EMT, CRT, 33° F&AM, PE, RLS, Ed.D, DVM, et. al., **cannot find it.**

Does that mean I do NOT have CLL anymore? No, I'm afraid that that is not what that means. CLL is not a cancer they can cure, YET! They assure me that all they can do is knock it back so that it's now like a drunk small-town business-man on a convention in the big-city who, in pursuit of things not available at home gets himself separated from his group of friends and then rolled by local criminal establishment; a harsh, but temporary setback. The numbers say I could remain disease-free for many, many years, or the disease could re-manifest itself in just a few months, in the same manner or in a more malevolent one. I pressed Hemopsapien on this. I then pressed him harder. He would not take the bait.

"Why don't you use your own words and tell me?" He asked.

"You, yourself, having read the same information that's available to me said that the median life-span had not been reached on the FCR Protocol, since in the eleven years since its inception, there were people still living who were disease-free."

"Well, I had hoped for some magic words, or perhaps an over-commitment that I could later hold you accountable to, but I can see that I'm getting nowhere with that tack," I said.

"And why would you want anything else other than the truth?" He asked, knowing the answer, the same way I had pressed him, knowing the answer. We were even now.

"I've taken risks with worse odds before and not been afraid, though the stakes were perhaps less high," I said.

"But this is not a wager you chose, or can even choose to take. Here you are and here it is, as tangled up as a billy-goat in a six-strand barbed-wire fence, scratched and bruised whether you get loose or stay stuck – either way!" he said.

I reflected on that. I reflected on the soreness of my hip where PA Katie did the BMB. I reflected on others I knew who have cancer that have done well. I reflected on others that I know who have cancer that are not doing well. I reflected on others I knew who had cancer that are no longer with us. I reflected until my reflection disappeared in the reflecting pool, and all I saw was a troubled surface and a future, cloudy and gray, but filled with hope, possibilities, and promises. I poured some first-cold pressed extra-virgin olive oil (is there another kind?) on the water's troubled surface, and I saw depth, not just a surface reflection. What I could see in the depth I cannot describe, cause I can't be sure words can convey it, or even if I understand what I saw in the depth; only this, that the depth was there, and what was in the depth was real, and what was reflected on the surface was just an illusion.

Perception is reality they say. Our illusions are based on our perceptions. Do illusions then become reality? Does how we view ourselves become the thing that is real for us? If we see ourselves in defeat, is defeat then our end? If we see ourselves victorious, is victory then our end? If our illusion shows us defeat, can that then serve to strengthen our resolve, forestalling the illusion? What do we do with the information provided by our illusions? How can we use it?

Many, many times, I have had visions of myself as an old man: cheerful but purposefully curmudgeonly. In visions I have seen my grandchildren and great-grandchildren, and myself and my wife surrounded by a great host of family, the fruit of our own loins. I was a young man when I had these visions. The Bible says that the young men will see visions and the old men will dream dreams. I still have visions. I must still be a YOUNG man because I still have visions; I have not yet begun to dream dreams. I am still in my vision period. Might I be wrong about this? Sure, but I am sticking with this path, unrelenting, persistent, undistracted from my purpose.

"Your destiny has been determined from the very foundations of the world," says John Calvin, interrupting me like a bad houseguest who wakes you up to ask you where the soap is when they want to take an early morning shower.

"Luther said that there is no such thing as pre-destination. That what you are calling pre-destination is merely God's ability to foresee!" I reply to Calvin, baiting him, but to some it seems I have cast my bait into thin air.

Calvin takes the bait. "But Luther said that God's foreseeing cannot be wrong, so technically, that is pre-destination, since it cannot be erroneous, or even altered."

Hoping to get him to take even more bait, I say, "But my present alters my future!"

"You can no more choose circumstances of the present than you can alter the past or change the future. By the way, where is the soap? I need to take a shower this morning." He says.

"John, here's my present choice. I am choosing to throw you out on your ear. I am choosing to say that there is a big difference in what you maintain and what Luther says. I choosing to deny you the soap you require. These choices are all being made in this very moment. They are altering my future," I reply.

"These choices we make in these trivial matters can have no impact on our futures," he says.

"Oh, yes they can," I said, springing, the trap, "for YOU will be seeking other accommodations for your shower and your quarters for the night! Luther has been invited and I won't get a wink of sleep with you two arguing all night. Out. Out. Out you go, and NOW!"

"Such shoddy treatment from a normally accommodating host!" he says.

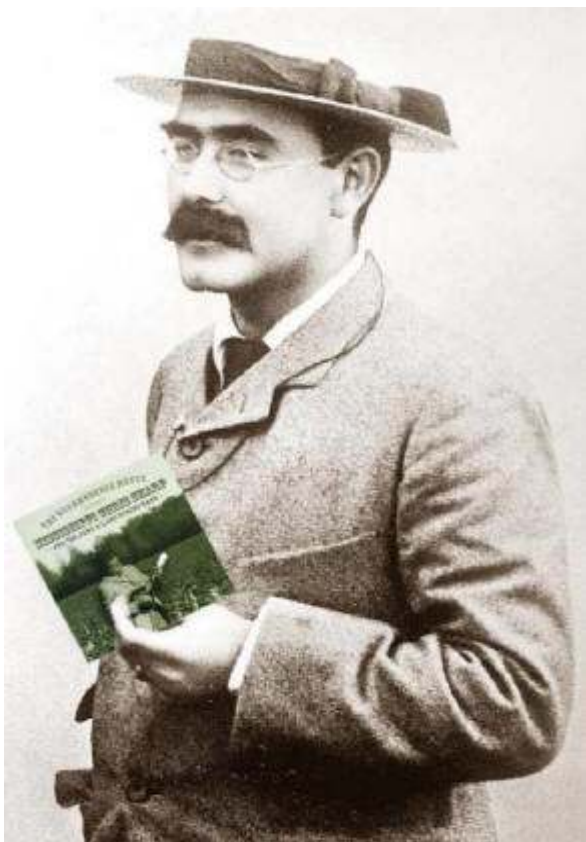
"You should have seen it coming," was my only answer to a fading, wavy apparition rapidly disappearing onto the mist.

"You know I'll be back!"

"Sure you will, but not tonight!" I say, with some great satisfaction. Let him ponder on that for a while. Today, I am choosing. I am choosing to temporarily rid myself of Calvin, and I am choosing the visions I have had for myself for a long time. I ponder that for a moment. I say it back to myself – choosing the visions I have had for a long time . . . choosing the visions I have had for a long time . . . choosing the visions . . . long time . . . visions . . . time. Foreknowledge? Pre-destination? Now the difference is no longer so clear. I'll wait until Luther gets here. I'll let him explain it. I won't think about it a moment longer. Right now, I will choose to think about something else.

Immediately, visions of myself as an old man return, distracting me from any other thoughts. Somewhere, across the ages, across an eternity, like a bad mix-down and mastering job on a cheap record with the reverb turned up as big as all eternity, I hear Calvin's guffaw of laughter

in the background. He can't read my mind, but he sure has been around enough to know human nature as well as if he could. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he shows back up again this evening, right about suppertime.



Here's something to ponder. Rudyard Kipling, the novelist, the poet, the adventurer, the manly-man, the cigar-smoker, the gin-drinker, the chauvinist, the racist, and probably the Calvinist, has been much maligned by the people who tell us the difference between good literature and bad. Kipling falls into the BAD category. I've often wondered why. Hemingway and Faulkner exhibited nearly all the same traits, but they are considered GOOD literature. Mark Twain exhibited some of the same traits, but he is considered good literature. Maybe these traits are acceptable in an American, but not in a Brit. Maybe good ENGLISH literature is W. Somerset Maugham, or Thomas Hardy. They say Chaucer is good literature, and the only reason he didn't smoke cigars, I'll bet, is because the British had not yet exported tobacco from the Americas.

Here's ol' Rudyard. The author of Captain's Courageous. The author of The Jungle Book. The author of Kim. All of these are on the top shelf of

my library, waiting to be re-read for the umpteenth time. Here's the ol' Rudyard the poet who wrote **Gunga Din** and who said, "a woman is a woman, but a good cigar is a **SMOKE!**" When I first heard the Kipling poem below, it was Cher reciting it out loud (poetry is always best OUT LOUD) on the old **Sonny and Cher Show**. I was at first as enthralled as any healthy teen-age boy should be over Cher and her Bob Mackie dresses, but the poem was of an importance which has lasted far longer than memories of her in exotic, revealing dresses (though I remember those, too!).

I would give every possession I own **IF** I could wish this on every human and have it come true. I wish this for my own son. I wish this for ME. I wish this for YOU. I wish this for everyone. **IF** people could only conduct themselves in this manner, then we would have a better world. **IF** a poet ever spoke to the heart of a man, this poem spoke to me. It still does. I hope it speaks to you, too. **IF** it does, you will be a better person, and the world a better place. God bless you, Rudyard Kipling!

If

*If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you;
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or, being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or, being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise;*

*If you can dream - and not make dreams your master;
If you can think - and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with triumph and disaster
And treat those two imposters just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn out tools;*

*If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breath a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: "Hold on";*

*If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with kings - nor lose the common touch;
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you;
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run -
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And - which is more - you'll be a Man my son!*

All I can add to that is, "AMEN!"

4/10/10 Hello, New-and-Improving Old Self

Last night, I had the great joy to travel to Greenwood, Mississippi, the very heart-beat of the Mississippi Delta, and was just simply beside myself over the great fortune of playing at Turnrow Books' Summer Songwriter series with the superlative songwriters Tricia Walker and Davis Raines. It was also great to have my friend, ol' Sip, turn out to see us. I had planned on staying the night, not believing that I would have the energy after the show for the two-and-a-half hour drive home. Immediately after the show, I heard of plans to go and eat. Tricia asked me if I were going to go with them. I said, "Sure!"

Somehow, during the course of everyone schlepping their stuff (it takes a lot of stuff, particularly for me!) to the doors for loading in the vehicles, and amid my joy of talking with Jamie (Turnrow's proprietor), I got separated from the group. This could be because Tricia and Davis were parked out front and I was parked out back and we were all loading up stuff in different locations. When I finished getting loaded up, I went back in and Tricia and Davis were gone. Jamie was still there, but he did not know where they had gone to eat. I called Tricia on her cell phone, which, of course, was OFF (no performer leaves their cell phone ON while they are in the midst of a performance, only audience members do that!), so I got her voice mail.

I spoke to the voice mailbox, "Tricia, I do not know where y'all went to eat AT!" (Now, at this point I must say this: I have a gracious lady whom I love very much who has very kindly volunteered to edit this lengthy blog, a not-insignificant undertaking for which I am truly grateful, but I must warn her in a most Churchillian manner not to mess with any preposition I end a sentence with!)

I looked at my watch. I stopped to consider if my belly was complaining about any lack it may be suffering, and nothing registered as a complaint. I checked to see what my energy level was. I then paused to consider that I MUST get my taxes done THIS weekend. So, the horse, now properly saddled, was pointed towards the barn and began her brisk trot, as horses are wont to do when they know they are headed back to the barn.

Some fifteen minutes or so later, my cell phone rang.

"I am SO sorry you didn't know where we went to eat. We are at the Delta Bistro just around the corner from the bookstore," said Tricia.

"The entire Mississippi Delta is behind me now, I am in the hills of Carroll County. This horse is headed for the barn!" I said.

"You mean you are driving home tonight?" She asked.

"Yessum! I decided that if I ate now I'd get too sleepy to make the run home, so I'm off."

And from there we exchanged pleasantries, regretted the lack of neck-hugs prior to parting but promised each other plethoras of future neck-hugs, and I sent my best and highest regards to Davis. The phone put away, I now focused on the drive home, pushing that horse as fast as I dared, seeing that there are those who might overlook a horse ridden perhaps a bit too fast, but won't tolerate seeing a horse pushed too hard on their roads.

I made it all the way to within about 30 miles of home before I began to get sleepy, and I mean really sleepy. Driving now with my left eye closed so that there is only ONE striped line speeding towards me, because when I get tired of driving my left eye just won't seem to stay in sync with my right one. I top the next hill and see, from the distance, what seems to be a thousand flashing blue lights. A roadblock!

Fortunately, the more tired I get the slower I drive, so I was driving about 59 in a 65 MPH zone. I was not speeding. When I see all those blue lights at night, old paranoias immediately come racing back and I am thankful that the only thing I have had to drink is a diet coke, and the only drug in my vehicle is the Prilosec I have sitting on the console between the two front seats, right there in plain view of anyone who wants to look. It seems that when you've gotten to the age where you don't leave home without your Prilosec, law enforcement officers no longer view you as a perpetrator.

I slowed down and cautiously drove up towards the officer flagging me forth, window open, driver's license already in my left hand held out for the officer to get. He took the license and then shined his flashlight in my face and into my truck, no doubt spotting the Prilosec on the console. He then looked at the license for the briefest of moments, handed it back to me saying, "Have a safe drive Mr. Sharp," and off I went. This was a road block worthy of a felony man-hunt, and I did not fit the description of the perpetrator. I suppose the bulletin had previously gone out to the officers that the perpetrator was NOT known to be armed with Prilosec. This blue-light induced adrenaline rush enabled me to drive the rest of the 30 miles wide-awake. I am now persuaded that the Lord had placed them there just for my own safety and that of the others on the highway, because I think that perhaps that last thirty miles might have been hazardous.

But I made it home safe, and actually drove further without getting tired than I thought I would. This is more like the old me.

I liked the old me. The old me was full of energy. I enjoyed the old me's company. Now I am stuck with the new me. The new me has less energy, but I feel it returning more and more, bit by bit, the leukemia no longer detectable and the side-effects of the life-restoring toxins being slowly purged from my body day-by-day. While I liked the old me just fine, this new me, after I get a full head of steam built up and can keep the boiler pressure in the green zone for longer periods, is perhaps going to be even better. The new me has a different perspective. The new me is fully cognizant of the fact that everything in life is not about me.

The new me? The new me is just another clod making a part of the main.

That has GOT to be an improvement!

Women already know that everything in life is not about them, because women become mothers. It is MEN who must learn this. If we men are fortunate, we learn this from our women; if not, life has other, less pleasant ways of teaching this to us.

If I am allowed to quote Kipling again (and just who can stop me?) it is this:

If I were hanged on the highest hill, Mother o' mine, O mother o' mine! I know whose love would follow me still, Mother o' mine, O mother o' mine!

4/24/10 The Battle Lost; The War Never Changes

We fight battles all through life, but the outcome of the war never changes. Battles present themselves and we race head-strong to accept the challenge, or when our enemy allows, retreat to fight the battle another day on the ground of our choosing. We do not always have this luxury as sometimes the battle comes to us and with the enemy to our face and the river to our back, we must then stand and fight or face certain defeat, and perhaps face certain defeat anyway.

Sun Tzu said: Throw them [the troops] into perilous ground, and they will survive; plunge them into Death Ground, and they will live.

If Sun Tzu cannot be fully accepted here, the following things must be stipulated.

1. Throw them into Death Ground, where they have nothing to lose and everything to gain, and they will fight with a ferocious intensity.
2. A dangerous situation can produce a violent, and dangerously unpredictable response.
3. To fight means risking death and to surrender means certain death.
4. Death is coming, if not in this battle, then the next; and if not then, then soon enough.

Some fight battle after battle, with no respite, only to have death claim them in the midst of their greatest battle. In the long run, there is always one battle we will lose in our personal fight – that is our last battle. The result of it is the same for everyone who is alive.

That cheerful bit of human philosophy having been observed, please note the following for a view of someone ELSE'S very personal and real battle, fought valiantly, but lost, nevertheless. It was not my personal battle, but the news of the loss of this battle was painful for me to hear. I am still pained by it. John Donne said, "No man is an island!" This bell tolled for me:

TUPELO – Mona-from-Tupelo, 45, died Saturday, March 6, 2010, at the Big-as-Texas Cancer Center in Houston, Texas. She was born in 1964, in Houston, Mississippi. She was a homemaker and a member of the Baptist Church in Tupelo.

Services will be at 11 a.m. Thursday at the Baptist Church in Tupelo. The Rev. David will officiate. Burial will be in the Chapel Cemetery in near Tupelo. The Funeral Home near Tupelo is in charge of the arrangements.

Survivors include her husband; two daughters; her mother; and two brothers of Tupelo. She was preceded in death by her father.

Pallbearers will be Tim, Tony, Wes, Rob, Bob, Gene, Rick and Mike.

Visitation will be from 9 a.m. to service time Thursday at the Baptist Church and from 2 to 3:45 p.m. Thursday at the Chapel Cemetery. Memorials may be made to the Baptist Church Benevolence Fund.

You have been previously introduced to David-from-Tupelo. Debbie and I met him at BATCC during my trip there to start my chemotherapy back in August. He had been there two weeks as the BATCC Allogenic Stem Cell Transplantation unit prepared him to donate bone marrow to his sister, Mona. David indicated that this was his precious sister's last opportunity to survive her Lymphoma.

It was not Mona's first battle. There had been many.

As a child, she had been diagnosed with and successfully combated a Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma. David-from-Tupelo indicated to me during dinner one evening that this had been a hard fought battle for her and during that time he and his little sister had become very close.

Now, the battle was raging again, but the circumstances very different. As a wife and mother of two young, lovely daughters, the number of people who loved her and depended on her had grown exponentially. Like all of us, she wanted to see her children grow up and present them to the world, armed and equipped to lead successful lives, all shiny and polished. Mona may have thought she had some more work to do, but I'll bet a dollar to a dime her work on this project was far ahead of where she thought it was; she no doubt knowing from her own childhood battles how precious time was, and just how fragile life can be, and her investments of her precious time in her project carefully chosen to yield the greatest dividend.

Now a bone marrow transplant is dangerous business. It is the medical definition of Sun Tzu's DEATH GROUND. There is no turning back. The enemy is in your face, and a wide, raging river to your back. No retreat; only fight, fight, fight, until the enemy flees or you succumb.

When I was first diagnosed, well meaning but un-knowing friends suggested a bone marrow transplant, and volunteered to be the donor if they were a successful match. This sentiment was much appreciated. However, a bone marrow transplant is very complicated and is only used as a last resort; but it SOUNDS so simple.

"Why don't you get a bone marrow transplant?" a friend might ask, adding, "I'll be happy to be the donor if I am a match."

"Thank you, but you don't know what you're talking about," I might say back, and could have well had it said back to a well-meaning but misinformed me at one point in my life. Those days are behind me now.

The implication here is this: it's JUST a bone marrow transplant. It's relatively simple, not major like a HEART transplant. Just take a little of the bad marrow out of the bone to make room for some of the new marrow, and just slip it in there and be CURED!

It's just not that simple. It is FAR more complicated. Here's an example of just how complicated it can be. The average one-year survival rate for a heart transplant patient is 88%, so 88 out of 100 heart transplant patients are still alive at the end of one year. The national one year survival rate for a Bone Marrow Transplant patient is 54%; so at the end of one year, out of 100 people who had bone marrow transplants, 46 of them lost their final battle. There are so many potential life-threatening and life-consuming complications; I am not going to name them all here. You can GOOGLE yourself and read all about it. Go to GOOGLE and type in "Allogenic Bone Marrow Transplant +complications" and you'll get page after page, some of which you'll be able to understand, but lots that will be far beyond the comprehension of the layman except for this: The layman will understand that this is serious business.

In battle, the outcome is NEVER certain, but if one were to ask me, I'd rather have the odds of the heart transplant patient than the bone marrow transplant patient any day. Who wouldn't? For this, there's no need to have an advanced mathematics degree to be able to decide which set of numbers is the better set.

I knew Mona was facing a hard battle. I prayed for her every time she crossed my mind, which was frequently more than once a day. I prayed in faith. Not having heard from David-from-Tupelo with any updates, I decided it was time to e-mail him and inquire about her status. But this is a point in which my faith failed me, or perhaps better said that I failed my faith, because even though I prayed in faith, I had some serious doubt. I decided I'd check obituaries before I sent David the e-mail inquiry. Some faith!

That's when I found the obituary above. I was crestfallen. I called Debbie. Together, we mourned the passing of someone we never met, and now will never meet this side of heaven; though her brother made her, her family, and her battles known to us. Not only that, but Mona

and I shared a common bond in blood cancer. Her battle, more immediate, desperate and challenging than mine at THIS MOMENT, was nevertheless my battle, too, in the long run. I shared that with Mona. We still share that, though she has faced her final battle, and her war is over. In the end, the results of the war all lead to the same place for all humanity: the final battle. May we all face the struggle in our battles, right up to and through our final one, with the determination and grace that David-from-Tupelo witnessed in his sister and so ably communicated to me.

When I worked up my nerve I sent David this e-mail:

Hello, David!

I am so sorry to hear of your sister's passing. I know this was a terrible blow to you and her entire family.

I hope you don't mind me asking, but did she ever actually have the bone marrow transplant? If so, what complications did she face?

I have had a lot of people inquiring about her after reading about her on my blog. Many people, whom she and you did not know, were pulling for her success. They will also be sorry to hear of her passing.

You and your family will continue to be in our prayers.

David-from-Tupelo, an eloquent and capable writer, was kind enough to respond:

Thanks for your note about Mona. Her passing has been a tremendous loss to our family. We really thought she was going to make it. She left not only her husband, but two daughters, ages 16 & 9. She and I became very close when she successfully battled non-Hodgkins lymphoma as a teenager.

Mona had been at BATCC since mid-August. She had only come home for a few days in September. When she got back to BATCC., she developed sepsis, spending over a week in ICU. After surviving sepsis, her transplant doc told her that she had heart damage, and would not be able to have transplant. After more tests, and persuasion from cardiologist, transplant was approved.

She received transplant on 12/8, and everything went well. Her white count went up again, and everything seemed fine. (Of course I was not out there, so I did not see the things she had to do, as well as what she went through. My mom said that Mona had to be her own nurse.) But Mona had a great attitude.

Sometime in late January, her white cell count began to drop. She also became lethargic, and started sleeping a lot. Then she could not keep anything down. She went into the hospital in mid-February. After one week, she was getting worse, and placed in ICU. About two weeks before she died, she began hallucinating. Right before this happened, she told her husband that she couldn't get a grasp on her body. She had always been in tune with what was going on within her, and could almost evaluate her body better than the docs. At the point she indicated that she couldn't get a grasp, she began to give up. Right after going into ICU, they sedated her to remove her port because of staph. She never regained consciousness.

The docs at BATCC told my mom and brother-in-law that they couldn't conclusively say what happened to her. Right after she lost consciousness, tests indicated she had a clotting disorder known as TTP, which is in itself fatal. They began dialysis for the TPP. She also developed sepsis. Scans indicated no cancer, but the docs said brain scans were inconclusive, and the cancer could have gone to her brain.

Her husband and I went to BATCC on March 3, and she passed on March 6.

Her organs began to shut down over a week before she died. The decision was made on Friday morning to cease all attempts to keep her alive. The nurses told us that she could pass at any minute. The only thing given to her was a little oxygen and morphine drip. At that point on Friday morning, she already had multiple organ failure. She lived until 3:25 pm Saturday. Guess her heart was stronger than they realized.

Looking back on it, we believe that infection was the culprit. Even though she did well through the transplant, she could never be off medication for infection for very long. I don't think the infection ever left her body. As you well know about BATCC, there are docs for everything. She had teams of docs seeing after her. I was impressed that docs at one of the best cancer hospitals in the world had the honesty to say that they didn't know exactly what happened. They felt it a good possibility that an infection spread swiftly through her body, releasing it's powerful toxins. She just wasn't able to fight it off. I remember last April, her doc at UAB told her that it would probably be an infection that got her, and not the cancer itself.

BATCC is a great hospital. When my dad died with cancer three years ago, we afterwards wondered whether more could have been done at the different stages of his cancer. With Mona, we are at peace knowing that, if she couldn't survive at BATCC, she wasn't going to survive anywhere. I'm sure that they will review her case, and hopefully, they can glean something that may help the next person that has her type of lymphoma.

My sister had a servant's heart. She was always doing for others, and never wanted any attention called to herself. She even wanted a private funeral with no visitation. Thankfully, my brother-in-law didn't honor that. The church in Tupelo was full for the service. One of her pall bearers, whom I had never met, had just returned from Iraq after a 10 month tour of duty. He had only been cleared to return to civilian life two days before the funeral. He told me that while Mona was in Texas, she had made boxes of school supplies for Iraqi children, and sent to him. That was the kind of person she was.

I check your blog every couple of weeks, and I'm so glad that you are doing well. And I don't say that lightly. Many of the things that you describe I can relate to through Mona.

Hang in there and tell your wife hello for me. If you are ever going to be playing in Oxford, I wish you would let me know.

Best Regards,

David-from-Tupelo

I cannot continue now after reading this again. I will be back in a moment.

I have returned. A pause on the written page just does not do justice to the amount of time I had to take to think things through. Here's a partial list:

- Mona has faced her final battle.
- It was a hard-fought battle on DEATH GROUND.
- I mourn her family's loss.
- What started out as reflection on Mona, her struggle and her final battle suddenly became about ME.

- Though I am in remission now, the numbers indicate I will fight this battle yet again, and then perhaps again and again, right up until my final one.
- I indulged a while in self-pity.
- Then I rebuked myself for a while about that.
- After the self-rebuke, I was ashamed for a while.
- I then was ashamed of my lack of faith.
- Then I felt guilt because I was in remission while others were not.
- Then I felt ashamed and guilty for feeling ashamed and guilty.
- Then, I was able to remember what I had written just a few days ago that the Roman Stoic philosopher, Seneca, had said, and I began to laugh at my own folly.
- I then was able to reflect on human folly and vanity in general.
- I was reminded of King Solomon and Ecclesiastes
- I was reminded of JOB.
- Then I returned for thankfulness at what I HAVE and again rejected mourning for what I have LOST.
- Then I found victory in the fact that David-from-Tupelo declared that his sister had a servant's heart.

That was a long pause, though. I came out of my malaise with this, which I will keep, rejecting the rest of my own personal digression as impertinent, irrelevant, or a whining self-indulgence: ***May we all have a servant's heart*** – This is what the Lord wants from us. In the midst of her travails, Mona was spending her precious, dwindling energy and time in the service of others. This is a powerful testimony to the Spirit of the Lord within us. We all have a dwindling energy and time capital account from which we make constant withdrawals. When the capital is gone, the account is closed. How will we spend the assets we withdraw? May we all spend those assets wisely by investing them in others, where they will pay precious dividends, and not consume them on our own fears and desires!

To those of you who have friends with cancer, you might take note of the following exchange I had with a recent acquaintance who I am sure is going to become a personal friend.

If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to talk sometime about my 20+ year song co-writer/best friend. He got diagnosed with ALL [Acute Lymphocytic Leukemia] a couple of weeks ago (he just turned 40, with 3 young kids). Prognosis is good and he's responding to chemo well, so far. He'll be going to Vanderbilt for a 6-month stem cell protocol. He's nervous as hell, but I'm trying to focus that energy on song writing. It's new for me as well and I'm not sure what people going through this stuff want/not-want to hear. My work . . . is going to put me in Nashville a lot and we both want to take advantage of the time together and write. Any words of wisdom would greatly appreciated.

I don't have any words of wisdom, but I told my new friend this:

Sorry to hear about your friend and his ALL diagnosis. ALL is tough and fast. I am glad he is responding to chemo. CLL is different, and moves much slower, allowing a "watch and wait" approach, though the wait time was rather short for me. ALL does not allow this. I'm glad he has a good prognosis.

I'm sure he's as nervous as hell, and probably still in shock if his diagnosis was just a couple of weeks ago.

You can call me anytime to discuss this if you'd like.

This was stipulated: He is your best friend for 20+ years.

You don't have to say anything. You can read up about ALL, its treatment, the treatment's side effects, and its outcomes. When your friend wants to talk about it, he'll

talk; you can listen. Sometimes my friends would worry more than I did about my disease, and I would spend time and energy trying to comfort them and make THEM feel better about MY illness. I appreciated the fact that they were suffering with me, but this can become a bit tedious.

Our friends who are really just mere acquaintances disappear. They are afraid to see us because they fear they might say the wrong thing, or that we may die in their very presence. Our illness makes them face their own mortality, which is unpleasant. Our REAL friends are simply there, still taking about fishing, hunting, common interests, songwriting, guitars, vintage musical instruments of all types, and SEC football, in addition to inquiring about how we are feeling TODAY!!!!

When one has cancer, one's perspective changes to TODAY, though that does not mean that plans for the future are not being considered.

Direct your friend to my CLL BLOG on my website if you're of a mind. I have lots of readers with all sorts of cancers, particularly leukemias.

One can certainly channel their angst, fears, and pains into a new, very creative arena. The view of life from the cancer side of the street is completely different. This new perspective is certainly worth being recorded in prose, poetry, or better yet, in song. He should keep a journal as he goes through all of this. I keep mine on-line. I expose a lot, and some say risk a lot; but I am risking nothing.

If your friend is like you - educated, smart, and savvy, then he must NOT do this: become OVERWHELMED with all the things his smart, savvy-self can GOOGLE on the internet that indicate to him just how ill he is. The amount of bogus information and genuine clinical information written for professional geneticists and physicians is truly overwhelming. The numbers are the numbers. The odds are the odds. He is in those numbers somewhere. He must not decide for himself where that is, but must simply learn to be here now. I almost consigned myself to the cemetery at first with worry over everything I read. When I had positive news and rejoiced, I'd have news that mitigated the positive back to neutral, or worse, just a few days later. When the chemo was working, the side-effects became dangerous. When the side-effects mitigated, the chemo became less effective. You learn after a while to duck each punch when it comes, and counter when there is an opening. It's a long-distance run, not a sprint.

Though I am in remission, I am still in a danger zone of compromised immune system. I suppose when the compromised immune system returns to normal, the CLL will re-manifest itself. It sometimes works this way; sometimes not. I know this - - - I will not worry about it TODAY.

If you're also of a mind: the book of JOB is extremely helpful (worthy of an entire lifetime of study, so rich is it!). JOB had terrible tragedy in his life. His friends came to help him. As long as they were silent, they were a great comfort to JOB. When they began to speak, however . . .! You just simply have to be there. If you and he are co-writing songs, he may have difficulty expressing what it is that he is feeling. If, in co-writing, you and he can figure out how and be bold enough to express the truth of how he feels about this, you'll have some powerful songs that will speak to the humans at the very core of their nature as humans, no matter how trite it may seem on the surface. This is risky business in a writer, but truth is truth and it spans across generations. If you can't get your friend to tap into this, bring him up to see me. We'll go into my studio (delightful, by the way) and lock ourselves in, write some songs, then come out and walk down the hill and go fishing. I've got lots of room.

I'd enjoy meeting your friend. He sounds like he is in good hands at Vanderbilt.

Though he's in good hands at Vanderbilt, if he's responding to chemo, I wonder why he's on a stem-cell protocol, unless they are collecting and studying his stem-cells? I don't know what the particular protocol is, but SURELY, if he is responding to treatment, they are not considering a stem-cell transplant.

SO you readers will know, a STEM-CELL transplant and a BONE MARROW TRANSPLANT are the same thing. The two terms are used interchangeably.

That's enough for today. A thunderstorm rages in the distance at 5:50AM as I finish this. I have worked on it for hours.

Today will be full of stormy, perhaps dangerous weather. Our chances for this dangerous weather are very great. Like the wildebeests on the plains of Africa, we will ignore the lurking lion until we become the particular wildebeest the lion is chasing. Then we will flee from DEATH GROUND until we reach the river. With the lion behind us and the crocodile in front of us, we will seek shelter perhaps where none may be found. Some people will face this today in the guise of a very real, and very dangerous tornado. A tornado five miles away is easily ignored. A tornado 500 yards away and closing is not so easily dismissed. Some will perhaps fight their final battle. Some with cancer, their anticipated final battle just months away, will perhaps find themselves fighting a final battle that in complete surprise has overtaken them. I will worry about my leukemia, which is in remission, about as much as I am going to worry about the tornado out there somewhere, but not immediately threatening. I'll worry about it when I see it, or hear it coming. Like the wildebeest, I will keep on grazing as long as the lion is not chasing me. If the lion takes particular interest in ME, perhaps my appetite for the sweet grass of the plains may be somewhat stymied.

Life is like that. Just be here now!

4/25/10 Lions 10, Wildebeests 0

The restless, hungry lions claimed a current total (as of this writing) of 10 wildebeests yesterday evening. Three of them were young wildebeests.

The wildebeests claimed yesterday were fighting their own personal battles when they were overtaken by the lion shown in the link below, which resulted in the loss of their final battle which was not necessarily the one they had planned. So is it with wildebeests; so is it with lions.

<http://news.yahoo.com/video/jackson-wapt-18211534/caught-on-camera-yazoo-city-tornado-19307267>

The lion has moved on to other things, never giving a second thought to chaos it caused. The remaining wildebeests in that community are mourning.

Today, the rest of the wildebeests have returned to normal. Even with the knowing that the lions will one day, perhaps soon, strike again, the grass and trees look a beautiful dark green, the gentle breezes blow on a sunshiny April Sunday afternoon, and they who last night were just merely frightened by the lion's roar, are putting their heads to the grass and grazing in rich fields; last night's terror now just a distant memory.

"Out! Out! The Buzz-saw snarled!" said the poet, as the others turned to their own affairs.

If the wildebeests could talk, they'd say that life can be hard sometimes.

I am not making light of the people who had tragic losses in Yazoo City, Mississippi, yesterday. It could have just as easily been me and my family. We had three separate tornado warnings here last night. I watched as one violent storm passed through, one that Doppler radar indicated had a possible tornado, watched the wall cloud descend from the storm cloud, but it failed to produce a funnel. The storm passed on into Alabama, carrying its tornado warning with it. It's the vacuous wake of this powerful storm came another, very similar.

While they were passing over, I felt like the wildebeest that heard the lion's roar, but was not personally the wildebeest being roared at, and not the lion's object or particular intention. The lion could have just as easily been after THIS wildebeest. I was just fortunate to escape its attention. My final battle was left for another day. While DEATH GROUND was nearby, it was not the actual ground upon which I found myself, this time. Others, no different than me, and in fact very much like me, were not so fortunate.

May the victims of this foul weather and their families know that Peace Which Passes All Understanding.

04/30/10 Less Haste; More Caution



Most men pursue pleasure with such breathless haste that they hurry past it.

Soren Kierkegaard

Having felt rather poorly all week long, and in my race for the pleasure of my own bed, I made a mistake in taking medications the evening of the 28th, causing me to pass a miserable night and an even worse following day.

It seems that the more tired I get, the more my Restless Legs Syndrome (RLS) is exacerbated. Arriving home rather late after visiting a friend who had come home to Meridian from his new home on the island of Leyte, in the Philippines, I rushed in to take a shower and go to bed. After my shower, without my glasses on, I reached for the pill bottle that holds the Mirapex, the medication I take to ease the RLS symptoms. The dangerous part here is HASTE and NO GLASSES.

I take three (3) Mirapex tablets every evening. They are small white oval pills which the pharmacy usually puts in a small brown pill bottle with a white cap. On my last visit to Hemosapien, he had prescribed some Lasix, which is a diuretic designed to rid the body of excess fluids. Excess fluids have built up in me as a result of the steroids from the chemo, and my feet and lower legs had shown an inclination to painfully swell in the evenings. The Lasix has helped ameliorate those symptoms. I take one (1) Lasix every morning. Hemosapien had warned me not to take it at night since it would interfere with my sleep. The Lasix are also in a small brown pill bottle with a white cap, exactly the same size as my Mirapex bottle. Hmmm!!! Can you see what's coming here?

The Lasix and Mirapex are both very small white pills. The Lasix is round, the Mirapex oval, but to a farsighted person without his glasses they look identical; just a fuzzy white, soft roundness. In my haste, I grabbed up the Lasix bottle and popped three (3) of them into my mouth and swallowed. They and the Mirapex are so small one does not need any water to take with them.

Now, one (1) Lasix gets your bladder working overtime, and three (3) Mirapex may or may not get your RLS under control, but I am here to confirm to you that three (3) Lasix taken in lieu of Mirapex at bedtime is absolutely unacceptable. In my breathless haste in search of the pleasure of sleep, I rushed right past it and went headlong into an all-night vigil of an irritating, restless sleeplessness, loud ringing in my ears, and what seemed to be a garden hose running with reckless abandon attached to my bladder.

I managed to drop off to sleep at 6:00AM. It was a fitful, fretful sleep that was welcomed, nonetheless, but interrupted at 6:30 by the ringing of my phone. The workday had started and an employee was returning a call I had made the previous evening. Normally this is not a problem, since I usually am never asleep at 6:30 in the morning. Today, it seemed a harsh intrusion but I could not let this show when talking to an employee who only wanted to verify my instructions in the message I had left the previous day so he could be sure to deliver what

I had asked for. It would be bad form to show annoyance at this interruption, particularly since the nature of human words and human communications means that sometimes others do not find the clarity we intended in our words. We all despise ambiguous instructions from our superiors. I managed to suppress my grumpiness, recognized my own fallibility with words since it became clear to me that any reasonable person might have misinterpreted what I meant in my message, and tried to go back to sleep after the call ended – a foolish endeavor.

Once awake, my overactive bladder again reminded me of its own insult, and the phone, as if it were a thoroughbred racehorse ready for a morning's workout at the track, began ringing non-stop. The day had begun in earnest. My sleeping was over, though my feeling bad was not.

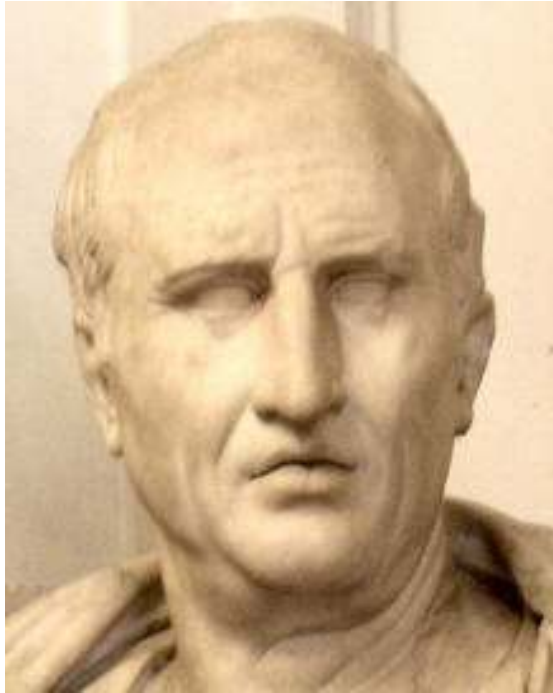
I was as miserable yesterday as I have ever been with THIS exception: I knew that my misery was of a self-induced temporary nature. "This, too, shall pass," was running through my head all day. It was passing all right; right through my kidneys and into my bladder. I looked forward to its complete passing with great jubilation.

Last night, with my glasses on my face, I held both pill bottles in my hands. In the left, the Lasix, and in the right, the Mirapex looked back at me. I carefully placed the Lasix back in the bag that hangs by my lavatory. I then took the Mirapex. I then went peacefully and soundly to sleep. This morning, everything seems completely different., perhaps because last night, I did not hurry past my pleasure in a breathless haste.

Hemosapien will think this is funny. I think it's funny, too, now. I did not think so yesterday.

I laugh at my own folly. From the far-side, this all seems much ado about nothing except for this: May we all be more deliberate with less haste.

5/1/10 May Day! Nothing to Write



Even if you have nothing to write, write and say so.

Cicero

I could not let May Day pass without writing something, yet I have nothing to write ABOUT. Even though this places me on shaky, perhaps even dangerous ground, I decided to take Cicero's advice and am writing and saying so. When there is (thankfully!) nothing happening on the CLL front, it is easy to neglect the blog, and sufficiently neglected, I will lose my readers. With no CLL news to report, today, then it is life with CLL I must write about, and there is plenty of life going on all around me, and though I am in remission, they tell me that I have still have CLL; consequently anything I write about life will be about life with CLL. I must enjoy life with CLL and make note of it while I am in its midst, lest I

become ungrateful or negligent of the NOW happening all around me.

I started this with a quote from Cicero. [Marcus Tullius Cicero](#) lived from 106 BC to 43 BC. He was a Roman philosopher, orator, Senator, and statesman. He served in the Roman consul in the republic before Julius Caesar became dictator. He was later invited by Caesar to join in the first triumvirate with Pompey. Cicero declined because he saw this as dangerous to the existence of the Republic. He was right. He later ran afoul of Mark Antony who, as a member of the second triumvirate, was the executor of Caesar's intentions. It seems that Cicero and Mark Antony had never been on friendly terms. Cicero, always in defense of the Republic and crying out against the dictatorship of Caesar, was declared a public enemy and fled Rome. Mark Antony's henchmen caught up with him on his way to board a ship bound for Macedonia. Under the direction of Antony, Cicero's was beheaded. Mark Antony had also demanded that the hands which had penned so many attacks against him be cut off, and Cicero's severed head and hands were put on display in the Roman Forum. Mark Antony later ran into troubles of his own, as later did Julius Caesar. Those were troubled times.

Cicero's letters to his friend, Atticus, are so plentiful and detailed in their descriptions of events and personalities, they still today serve as an historical account of the times in which he lived. I suppose that when Cicero was not led to write in general, he was led to write letters to Atticus. His writing cost him his head; mine costs me nothing. The reader is left to make his own decision as to the value of each writer's work. It should not be difficult to decide which body of work has more value.

There were so many great minds in Rome! We have been taught that Romans were never original; that they borrowed their philosophy, art and even their gods from Greece. I have considered this and have chosen to reject it, though the idea is not completely devoid of merit. The Romans were like everyone else. They did not live in a vacuum. Even the Greeks got the

seeds of their thinking from SOMEWHERE, though it has not been sufficiently recorded for us to determine who their original examples were.

The Romans built on what they had. While they may have been lacking in the originality of their religion and philosophy, they had no lack in their ability as engineers, though they derived the seeds of their engineering skills from somewhere, too. The Greeks built the Parthenon. This, no doubt, was an inspiration to some future Roman architect.

Roads the Romans built two thousand years ago are still viable roadways today. Roman aqueducts still stand all across Europe, and some are still functional. In addition, some Roman engineer figured out that when you grind limestone into a fine powder, fire it in a kiln, then rehydrate it, it will set up like stone in the shape of the mold you have made. Today, we call this concrete. Can you imagine a world without concrete? Even steel bridges rest on concrete foundations. Steel buildings rest on concrete foundations. And reinforced concrete structures and bridges are between us and everywhere we would travel on a highway or back-road. Thank goodness for concrete. Thank goodness for the Romans.

But, some might say, "Well, the invention of concrete was inevitable; the Romans were just lucky."

That is like saying the writings of Shakespeare were inevitable, that if Shakespeare himself had not written them, then certainly someone else would have.

That is like saying that random chemicals in some tidal pool, somewhere, long, long ago, were provided the perfect conditions of heat and electrical stimulus in the form of lightning to begin to arrange themselves into increasingly complex chemicals, resulting in increasingly complex carbon-based chains that over eons of time became organic chemicals, then incredibly complex chains of amino acids, then cells, then cells capable of reproducing themselves, and then making the leap all the way to this computer I am sitting at while I am writing this. I'd say that's a stretch. Call me an ostrich, but I think a CREATOR is a more rational explanation than a level of probability that expands into a nearly infinitesimal number of places to the right of the decimal. If it's proof we're after, we can't find it either way; A measure of Faith is required.

To use analogies that are relevant, I must borrow some I have heard. Given enough time, monkeys can continue to arrange notes in a random fashion until they have successfully composed Mozart's *Concerto in D Major for Violin and Orchestra*. It has also been said that given enough time, those same monkeys could successfully make a banjo and play Earl Scruggs' *Foggy Mountain Breakdown*. While I have a serious problem with the whole monkey/Mozart theory, I am not capable of the imagination that will allow the monkey/*Foggy Mountain Breakdown* scenario. Not capable, I said. AM I limited by this confessed lack of imagination? I don't think so. I do wonder where monkeys got all that musical talent, though. Perhaps that is my limitation.

Science indicates what science indicates, and I am not anti-science, but THANKFUL for it. My life has been and continues to be immeasurably enriched by the achievements and advancements provided to us at the hands of science. I am reminded of this, though; someone wise once said, "Professing themselves to be wise, they have become fools."

Someone else wise once said, "The fool hath said in his heart, 'There is no God.'"

Having said that, I must now declare that I am wholly in support of science's empirical method and that it is the job of science to continually limit itself to those things which can be tested and reproduced in a laboratory. Unfortunately, this excludes anthropologists, sociologists, and political scientists who, like pure scientists, are observers and recorders, but unlike pure scientists must draw many conclusions where no experiments can be conducted, or

experiments unlike those reproducible in a chemistry lab. Things are not so simple where humanity is concerned, as the experimenter or the subject of the experiment.

Carry on, though. May every scientist follow his theories until they abandon him, and may they know at which point they have been abandoned. I am certain that this will not be before the grant money runs out. Scientists seldom declare that they have been exploring a dead-end path, and are forthwith RETURNING the grant money!

A certain wise man said this: ***Any man is liable to err, only a fool persists in error***

That same wise man also said this: ***It is the peculiar quality of a fool to perceive the faults of others and to forget his own.***

That man was Cicero. Remember him?

I have written this having had nothing to say. Once begun, the writing produced something to say, and it has now been said. Others, having read this may think that having written, I still had nothing to say, or at least nothing worth reading. They are rightfully entitled to their opinion. It sure has a lot of fun for the writer, though, and not for a single instant have I lacked perception of my own faults. I am not a fool.

“What has this got to do with CLL?” you ask yourself.

Nothing and everything. I will leave it to you to ponder that, since I, having written, now move on to other things. I think I’ll grab a banjo and play *Foggy Mountain Breakdown* like Earl Scruggs (or as near as I can to Earl Scruggs, which is still lacking SOMETHING!) and think about the possibility of monkeys being able to accidentally do that, wondering how long it will take them, and reflect on my own monkeyshines as I play. It sure took me a long time to learn to play it. I suspect it will take monkeys even longer. I am not sure that monkeys have actually taken this on as a project, yet. I’m sure someone is studying this or something similar with some government grant money, somewhere.

When monkeys play *Foggy Mountain Breakdown* like Earl Scruggs, I swear I will never pick up a banjo again!

I laugh at myself!

Before I go, I must add that many Facebook friends have wondered where I find all the quotes I paste on my profile. The quotes are all over the place. There are many books and websites which have famous quotations. The only problem one may have is knowing who is worthy of quotation. One does not learn this by watching a lot of TV. Turn it off and get a good book and read. If you don’t already have one (you probably do! At least a copy of Huckleberry Finn, or 1984 left over from your school years), get down to your local public library and get some books written by great thinkers where they tell us what they were THINKING. The folks at your local public library will be glad to help you! The value they represent to their communities is immeasurable. Use this free resource to the limit it is capable of serving you. That is what it is there FOR! (There, Steve McCartney, Chuck Steele, and Aunt Fleta, and librarians everywhere, is a plug for public libraries!)

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Go to <http://www.books.google.com> Google has books for sale, but the PUBLIC DOMAIN and FULL VIEW books are free. Go to ADVANCED SEARCH and it will give you the options to select only these books. Enter "TWAIN" as the author, and download a Mark Twain book for free. Mark Twain is, arguably, but always on anyone's short list, America's greatest author. He is a good place to start.

If you like what you read so far, Cicero is there, too. You can spend the rest of your life just studying what Cicero wrote and the things Cicero inspires you to read further, but that's not necessary unless you are so inspired you can't help yourself. May you find the great non-fiction or fiction writer, philosopher, or theologian whose work consumes you! May you abandon yourself in a worthy pursuit!

You will not find modern pop-psychology here unless you want to PAY for it. What you WILL find is the writing of all the people who INFLUENCED all modern thinkers, upon whose work modern political, theological, philosophical, and social thinking all rest. You will find what the Romans found, and your soul will find nourishment far greater than any modern-day chicken soup, I promise

5/12/10 A New Development: Unwelcome but not Entirely Unexpected

Where is the Life we have lost in living? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?

T.S. Eliot

This is a powerful statement. We have so much information at our fingertips, at every beck and call, that we are overwhelmed. Yet, has this glut of information produced more WISDOM? More KNOWLEDGE? It does not seem so to me.

Here's an interesting bit of knowledge, a significant bit of information: Hemosapien had long since told me that the chances of me getting a secondary infection and this being the cause of my demise were far greater than a death directly attributable to CLL. HE also has told me that it is remarkable that I have remained infection free throughout my whole course of treatment. It is unremarkable that I am remarkable!

It seems those days are behind me now.

A bad cold has been passed around my house and extended family for two weeks now. First my son, then my granddaughters and daughter, my son-in-law, then Debbie! Now it's my turn.

Saturday, May 8, early in the morning, I felt like a million bucks. It was exhilarating to realize that nothing ached, nothing hurt, I was well rested, and I felt as if I had never been through chemo. I felt so good I just had to tell someone, so I sent an e-mail to someone who would appreciate my feeling good. This is what I sent Hemosapien:

This morning, this stormy, windy Saturday morning, I am at the very edge of recapturing my former self. I am so thankful for that.

I got back a response from him that I won't share here, because it was personal, and let's just say that he was glad that I was feeling good and gave me a big AMEN!! Unfortunately, two hours after sending that e-mail, I began to get that tell-tale roughness in the back of my throat. Two hours later I was in a sneezing fit, and just a wad of nerves and dripping snot. I kept the bad head cold until Monday afternoon, when the cold decided to head South. I had no fever when this was a head cold, but the chest cold has led to a significant fever, and enough coughing that my entire rib cage feels like an old football must feel after having been punted and kicked throughout its life.

I again e-mailed Hemosapien:

For the first time since October 2008, I have a cold. Everyone at my house has had it, finally me. Last night, fever 102. This morning, fever 100. I also had hard shakes and chills with the fever.

Ever the prudent doctor, here is his response:



If fever comes back > or = 101, or if shakes/chills return, then you need to contact the office and come immediately for labs, x-ray and blood cultures. This would include the ER if after hours.

I knew this is what he would say. The reason for this caution? An absolute neutrophil count of 1200 and an absolute lymphocyte count of 900 means that my body has no really effective way of dealing with this infection itself, and UNCHECKED, the infection could rage, easily getting out of control.

So here it is, 1:00AM. Twenty minutes ago, my temperature was 101.8°F. I took some ibuprofen earlier, and am watching it come down. At the moment, it is 100.4°F. Unfortunately, the ibuprofen does not get at the root cause of the fever; it just reduces it, thus MASKING the true nature and severity of one's infection. Had I not taken the ibuprofen, Hemosapien's instructions would have me on the way to the ER right now.

So right here, right now, I am making myself this promise: If my ibuprofen reduced fever gets to that 101°F degree mark, I am going to the ER. I hope it waits until morning to do so. I'd rather go to Hemosapien's office than go to the ER. Of course, fever always declines with the daylight, so if it waits until morning, it'll wait until tomorrow evening. We'll see.

I'll keep you posted. Maybe you can use this bit of knowledge. It could turn out that the information I have is information without knowledge; and that the knowledge I have is knowledge without wisdom.

Keep your fingers crossed. I am monkeying around with, and rationalizing my way around something that is dangerous. I must not be too flippant about it.

1:30AM: Temp 100.6°F

2:00AM: Temp 100.8°F

2:05AM: Temp 101.3°F

I swear that 102°F is the get off my rear end mark, though it seems to me that this digital thermometer I have swings wildly. What it lacks in calibration and accuracy is made up in ease of use, however, I'm looking for accuracy.

And while I am writing this, worried about a point or two in my temperature, I get an e-mail from a worried grandmother asking for prayer for her grandson who was rushed this evening to Children's Hospital at UAB in Birmingham for complications with his diabetes. The complication? Ketoacidosis, his grandmother said. I will know more about ketoacidosis in just a few minutes. The prayers would not wait, but were sent forth immediately.

5/30/10 A Reluctant Writer

I have been needing to update my blog, but reluctant to do so. My last writing I left like a Saturday matinee serial. It's like I left Gene Autry right in the middle of being surrounded by the bandits, his six-gun empty (a very RARE thing in a western . . . I wish I could get a pistol like that!!!), Champion hobbled, the stagecoach stationmaster's helpless daughter a hostage being menaced by an unwashed bearded man, and Pat Buttram knocked unconscious. The suspense! The Suspense!

The fever subsided at sunrise. I have had no hint of fever since then. The chest cold diminished into weeks of coughing to remove its last vestiges, which still linger. This has been a durable, persistent malady passed around my entire family. It turned to strap in my wife and my son-in-law. I have avoided it thus far, absolutely not wanting any trace of strep.

Things are returning to normal, though. In the midst of the sufferings with the cold, I had an old friend return for a visit, and I spent all Wednesday night, May 19, in the emergency room with a kidney stone. It was a small one, but it felt like a baseball. I managed to pass it in the hospital. The CT scan they gave me indicated that I had another one, a small one, but it was located in a place where it would be content to remain until it got much larger. Lucky me!!

I am not complaining. I am merely observing and reporting.

Over the years I have had occasional bouts with kidney stones, having had lithotripsy twice. I'll take this as my banner, just like Harding's presidential campaign slogan, "A Return to Normalcy!" Occasional kidney stone or active cancer?? HMMMMMMM! Let's see! What to do? It's certainly not like trying to decide what kind of dessert I want after a big dinner. It's not like trying to decide what color paint to put on the walls in the guest room. It's not like trying to decide which household chore I will tackle first. It's not even like I can make a decision at all. It just is what it is. If I could choose, I'd take the kidney stone, though they can be an egregious violation of comfort and a quiet, peaceful existence.

All in all, as I have said before, I still feel my old self returning. I am thankful for that!!!

My friend Margaret has received a cancer-free green flag from her recent CT scan. Margaret will continue to take chemo on a maintenance basis that will harass and destroy any free floating cancer cells that may be loose in her body. I say that there are none, but the maintenance doses of the chemo are an insurance that her doctor (and mine) thinks is wisely applied. Many prayers went up to heaven for Margaret. They were offered in faith. By faith, the prayers were answered. Here's to Margaret returning to NORMALCY, with a new and improved perspective on what's important in life; and may that life with her husband and family be lived out of an abundance that flows from heaven so that there is not room to gather it all in. May that abundance spill over to fill other's lives in the most real, and fulfilling manner.

In all honesty, the better I feel, the less I find to write about. I must not let this happen. I have been busy at work, and looking forward to my trip to Montana and California in July. Canaan and I will have a good time on our road trip.

One thing has certainly changed for me. If you get me home, it has become extremely difficult to get me to leave. I have noticed that it can be difficult to get others to leave here, too. I am so thankful to have a home in which me, my family, and my friends find peace and plenty.

Debbie has adopted a new rule, though. She got it after reading a small book of Ben Franklin quotes that had been laying about the house. Ol' Ben said, "Fish and visitors begin to stink

after three days!" I was already familiar with this. Debbie got the book out and pointed to the phrase.

"I have a new household rule or two," she said, her finger indicating just which rule she had in mind. She showed me the book.

"Your rule is that fish and visitors begin to stink after three days?" I asked, my usual smart-aleck self. "What action is required by this rule which is just an observation?"

She patted her foot in impatience and said, "My rule is that since I seldom have guests, I want YOUR guests back to their own homes before they begin to stink in mine!"

"That's just one rule. What is the other one?" I asked.

"There is a big difference between our friends and our friend's pets," she said.

"And?" I asked with raised eyebrows.

"In all our years of marriage and travels, we have never inflicted our pets on our friends and their homes. We have kenneled our dogs, or made arrangements for them to be looked after in our absence. We have never traveled with our pets."

A moment of silence ensued as I reflected on what she had said. She was right, we have never traveled with our dogs. We both would have thought it such the height of discourtesy to inflict our dogs on our guests that it never occurred to us to do so.

"Continue, please ma'am," I said.

"Their dogs and cats are not welcome here or in our house," she said.

"Well, being the country, it should be an easy thing to keep the dogs out of the house." I said.

"No, it's not. We have country dogs. Our dogs will not enter the house except upon certain invitation. They run free all the time. They either learn at an early age the hazards of the road, or at an early age they meet their demise. It is the way of free running country dogs. Our guests dogs are invariably city dogs and house dogs. They must be supervised or restrained at all times. If restrained, they whine and cry until their master's hearts are breaking. They are then gathered into the arms of their loving masters who look at me like I am an evil person cause I don't want their FiFi in my house. Invariably, their inattentive masters let their dogs slip in between their feet and enter the house with them inadvertently. Or the dog sits at the door and whines and scratches my front door, paws at my porch furniture, harasses and barks at our own dogs, who LIVE here, and wind up inside, on my furniture, marking their territory in the most conspicuous and inconspicuous places, having my human food containers used as dog watering and food dishes, which I do not like, and leaving their dog hair all over the place. Even worse, our dog-toting guests say, in a very imposing and discourteous manner, 'Well, I'll just hold FiFi in my lap while she is inside so she won't bother anything,' making me feel guilty for their inconsiderate behavior, when the truth of the matter is that I don't want FiFi in my house, at all. Not in a lap, not in a box, not in a pet carrier, not in a garbage bag. My asthma notwithstanding; I don't need a REASON, medical or otherwise, to NOT want something in MY OWN HOUSE.

"I do not like it and no longer want friends to bring their dogs here at all. Invariably FiFi or Spot or whatever the dog's name, has, as the dog whisperer would say, an owner that needs to be rehabilitated. They treat their dogs like they were people and not like the dogs they are. I simply no longer want to be bothered with them. Dogs are not welcome. And cats are not welcome because our own dogs are liable to kill them, and I do not want this as a liability or blemish on any friendship when a cat is killed by our dogs and I am not even remorseful. Neither of us care anything about a damn cat!"

"You realize that this will make our home off limits to some of our friends," I said.

"I no longer care. I love our friends and your music friends, but I do not want their dogs and cats here. Period! I will consent to be inconvenienced by the CHILDREN, but no longer their pets," she adamantly said, hands on her hips, glaring down at me as I was sitting in a chair on the porch from which, broom in hand, she had just chased one of our own dogs. How would it be that she will not allow our own dogs to sit on her porch furniture, but must allow this of the dogs of others; too graceful to even say anything, much less chase them with a broom. It was truly more than any adult should have to bear in their own home.

Debbie doesn't ask for much. She is a marvel of grace and forbearance, but I think she has had enough. If I am a King in my own home, it is because I have a Queen who has made a home worthy of a King's residence. I know when to defer to the Queen; all wise Kings do. I would not have my Queen feel like she is playing second fiddle to ANY dog. That would be a terribly misplaced set of priorities. Sorry, FiFi!

Saturday, June 12, 2010

The Gulf oil spill is a terrible, terrible disaster. I have lived close enough to the Gulf of Mexico to catch the smell of a salty breeze all my life. I live as far away from the Gulf as I ever plan to right now. I never want to be too far away.

The people who live along the Gulf have survived many disasters, all of them, to my recollection, were natural disasters, except this one. The people of the Gulf will survive this one, too, but it is certainly of a different character. Everything is cause and effect, with the variable here being that mankind is operating outside of the zone of knowledge in an extremely hostile environment; we may as well be operating on the moon as operating at a mile deep.

I am absolutely astounded, though, and deeply troubled, not only from this disaster, but also by the comments I am hearing from some segments of the American people, particularly those who are calling for the government to seize the assets of BP. I don't think some truly realize what they are calling for, while some others are completely cognizant of the gravitas and import of their statements, which I find even more worrisome.

Our schools have failed us if American citizens who passed through any civics class think for one single instant that our government should seize ANY assets belonging to others, FOR ANY REASON. If any BP executives have committed a crime, then let them face criminal charges and have their day in court. If BP has committed civil offenses, then let those who have been damaged file their lawsuits for damages and argue their cases in court, then, if a judgment is forthcoming, let BP pay up or have their assets seized in the manner according to law. Generations ago laws were written to give corporate entities the status of a person, thus any violation of corporate rights becomes a violation of personal rights.

If the government can just seize BP's assets because the government is angry and thinks it is necessary, then what will YOU do when the government is angry at you and thinks it is necessary to seize YOUR assets? Where is the ACLU on this issue? Why have they not spoken out about these clamors for asset seizure, some of which are coming from congressional delegates and other government leaders?

Even worse that those who call for this out of ignorance are those who call for this who believe that our government (or any government) is a benevolent entity and should have its hand in controlling everything. This is even more dangerous and disingenuous. There are those who despise capitalism to the degree that they would love to see the institution fail. Capitalism is our source of production. It is those who produce something of value that give us an economy. Government produces nothing, Government adds value to nothing. Government does not create wealth. Government can only tax wealth and redistribute it, mostly to perpetuate itself.

It is the government that placed restrictions on drilling near shore and allowed oil companies to drill in deep water in compensation for those restrictions. It has been indicated that the government failed to supervise and regulate the rigs as they should (not to say that BP is not culpable). It is the government who chose to stand back and let BP give its best efforts to mitigate the damages of the well, which was probably the best thing because no one in the government has any experience in deep water drilling operations or salvage, other than in the collecting and filing of permits and paperwork.

If BP chooses, they can invoke their maximum legal and congressionally approved maximum liability limit of \$75Million. If I were BP's corporate counsel, this is exactly what I would recommend, and if I were the board of directors, exactly what I would do. This is precisely why that law was passed, since oil companies knew that there could be tremendous difficulties in

dealing with problems in deep water, and no prudent way to mitigate the damages. What a tangled web has been spun around us!

In the calls for a moratorium on deep water drilling, which has been implemented amid further calls to stop all offshore drilling, how many of those who clamor for greater restrictions have parked their cars and started riding their bicycles? We are addicted to energy, and portable energy means petroleum. Get ready to pay more. A LOT more.

A century ago our government thought it beneficial to break up Standard Oil due to the monopoly it held on petroleum production and distribution. That proved to be a wise idea. Standard Oil was split into seven independent companies. Somewhere along the way in the past twenty years or so, the government decided that it was OK if some of those sister companies got back together. Exxon and Mobil merged. And though BP was not a Standard oil spin off, it merged with AMOCO, which was. Guess what we have now? You've heard this before, and recently . . . companies that are too big to fail! The already overburdened government will have to bail out BP, who, being too big to fail, will be prevented from filing bankruptcy, unless it's just the US subsidiary that is allowed to do so, which is only PART of BP and not BP itself.

I am also watching the conspiracy theories developing around the Deepwater Horizon incident with great interest. Obviously, there are those with creative, imaginative minds who simply have too much time on their hands. Those developing conspiratorial explanations I have heard thus far include:

1. George Bush did this. (ludicrous)
2. Dick Cheney did this so Halliburton could make billions and billions of dollars. (even more ludicrous). It is entirely possible that Halliburton will make lots of money off of this, because they are the world's largest oil-field services company. Who else is one to call? Ghost Busters? Wal-Mart? Pep-Boys? Waste Management? Radio-Shack? The "Deadliest Catch" Fishermen? Mike Rowe and "Dirty Jobs?" The departments of Interior, Home-land Security, Commerce, and Energy? The EPA? Nancy Pelosi? AIG? The newly reconstituted General Motors?

How long are Bush and Cheney going to be blamed for everything? (By the way, it was during Bill Clinton's tenure that BANKS were deregulated!)

3. Barack Obama (who is really the antichrist, you know) purposefully took no action because he wants the situation to get so bad that the government will declare martial law, take over the entire petroleum industry, and have us ALL riding bicycles (unfortunately if that happens, we will have to buy those bicycles from the Chinese!)
4. The oil companies themselves purposefully did this so they could charge more for oil.
5. This was done by our own government as a new phase of the implementation of its master new world order plan which began with the governments inside job of the destruction of the World Trade Center on 9/11/01. (This is not just ludicrous, but ridiculous!)
6. Rosie O'Donnell did it.
7. Rush Limbaugh did it.
8. Aliens did it.
9. Aliens forced George Bush, Dick Cheney and Rush Limbaugh to do it after deciding that they were no longer willing to deal with Rosie O'Donnell.

The president is in over his head. Congress is in over their head. BP is in over THEIR head. The mile deep water is over all their heads. We are in uncharted territory. We'll have to trust others to get this done. In the long run, whatever is accomplished, it'll be the best creative

efforts of scientists, engineers, mechanics and laborers (most of whom will come from the private sector, not the government) that gets it done, not political rhetoric.

Seizing assets? What will you do when the government comes to seize YOUR assets?

"But this BP thing is different. This is a major deal," you might say.

"You'll think it's a major deal when the government comes to seize your minor assets," I might rightly say back.

"It's not the same," you may persist in arguing, but me, not being persuaded by the validity of your arguments will just sit there, shaking my head, wondering where in the world is the ACLU on this issue.

The citizens must demand that the government operate within the limits proscribed to it by the Constitution. I think the citizens are beginning to take that concept seriously, except for an extremely loud, obstreperous few, who have no idea of what it is that they are wishing for. I see this grassroots clamor for less government intrusion from the Tea Party activities. The same congressmen and senators who, in spite of all the polls that indicated otherwise, refused to believe that we citizens really did NOT want this juggernaut of a health care bill passed it anyway, all while exempting themselves from it by allowing themselves to keep a much better insurance. They further infuriate the public by continuing to say, to themselves and publicly, that they have simply not done a good job of EXPLAINING it to us, as if to say that we are simpletons, unlike them, and just can't understand what a wonderful thing they have done for us. No wonder the Tea Party seems to be gaining momentum.

If our president waves his presidential finger and declares, "BP, your assets are forthwith seized," you'd better stand back and get ready for your own assets to be seized.

Poor President Obama. In spite of all his immaculate Ivy League education, he is so far over his head he can't grab his ass with both hands. He is not alone, though, and has plenty of company. I find that terribly disappointing. He has to bribe members of his own party to support legislation that he thinks is important. He seems ashamed of the very nation he is the president of. Circumstances revealed to him only after becoming president have made it impossible to keep many campaign promises he made as a candidate. He was forced to come to grips with the realization that those detainees in GITMO are DANGEROUS. He snubs our allies and bows to those who despise us. He wants to be a good guy. He wants to be a good president. He moves to the center and his real base on the left raises mortal hell. He moves further to the left and the very people who got him elected abandon him (that would be independent moderates). He can't, or is unwilling, to protect our borders, not wanting to offend Hispanic voters, when OVERWHELMINGLY, the polls indicate that Americans think this is important. He can't even give a high school commencement address without a student falling asleep as he is telling them how important it is for each of us to be personally responsible and not point fingers or look for scapegoats, as he was doing his damndest to point fingers, not be responsible, and find that scapegoat. Perhaps he would fare better if words were something he used less and heard more. Perhaps if he really believed what came out of his own mouth it would serve him better. Perhaps if he actually STOOD for something we could all have more respect for him. I sure would like to. He is our president, after all. I hope and pray that he is our one-term president, and unless the economy dramatically improves, he will be limited to that one-term; but I don't think so. I think it will get worse, and I think that after Republican and Democrat incumbents alike get sent home, it'll be a while before any liberal gets elected to anything. Maybe he'll want his cabinet secretary to get the boot off of ANYONE's neck. Maybe he'll stop looking for an ass to kick and simply ENFORCE the law (including the

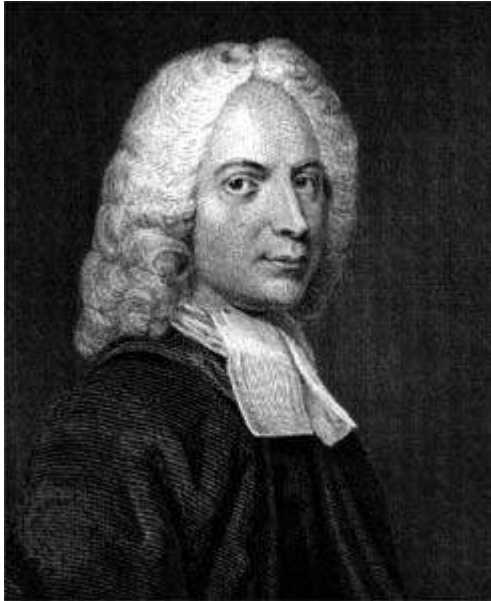
immigration laws), which is the responsibility with which he is charged as President of the United States of America. I wish him the best.

Barack Obama, in all fairness and candor, has done as bad a job, and as good a job as anyone else could have on the gulf oil spill. He is not personally the culprit of this disaster.

There is an old adage that says, "May you live in interesting times." That is us. These are certainly interesting times.

"What has this got to do with CLL?" I heard someone shout out above the roar of the rock throwing illegal immigrants who were foolishly throwing rocks at armed US Border Patrol agents along the banks of the Rio Grande between El Paso and Juarez as Mexican soldiers pointed their guns at our federal agents; I heard it above the noise on the Turkish ship as it was being boarded by the Israeli soldiers who, holding guns in their hands were being foolishly attacked with steel rods and broken bottles; I heard it above the cries of distress beacons set off by a 16 years old girl whose foolish (perhaps criminal) parents let her attempt to sail around the world in an inadequate vessel and into the Southern Indian Ocean in the summertime; I heard it above the wails and mourning of pelicans, terns, dolphins, Redfish and Red Snapper, oystermen, shrimpers, and other fishermen, oil rig workers, tourist industry workers, and all those whose livelihoods depend on a healthy, thriving Gulf of Mexico; I heard it above the cries of those who think it is a crime of the highest self-serving hypocrisy for our government officials to respect the JONES ACT at this very time while simultaneously ignoring our immigration laws; I heard it above the noise of public relations grandfalloon spewing forth from the mouth of Tony Hayward in 60 second TV commercials; I heard it above the shouts of traders on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange as the sell orders continue to come in, and the assets everyone thinks BP has an unlimited amount of dwindle before everyone's eyes since the largest part of their assets is wrapped up in the value of their stock;. And moreover, I heard it over the cries of those who continue to demand that they get something for nothing, which is always a BAD trade.

One day, you'll stop asking me that.



Acquaint yourself with your own ignorance.

Isaac Watts

"Pleased to meet you," I said to my formerly non-ignorant self. "Where have you been all these years?"

"I have been laboring under the self-inflicted millstone of a misconception that I was less ignorant than I actually am," my former self replied.

"Thus placing yourself at a terrible disadvantage?" the new, ignorant me asked.

"Exactly," I replied, "But, unfortunately, I didn't realize it until now," the new me said back to the old, less-ignorant me.

"Why have you been unwilling to admit that there is very little you know?" I asked me.

"Pride . . . arrogance . . . a lack of humility . . . a false humility . . . vanity! All of the above, none of the above. I don't know. I am too ignorant to have an intelligent answer to this. The only thing I am not ignorant of is that I seem to have wasted a lot of time with information that was without knowledge, and knowledge that was without wisdom . . . just a false bravado, an inflamed chutzpah to which I had no title, without any substance," I replied.

"What remarkable insight led you to this revelation?" the new me asked the old me.

"I don't know that the insight was remarkable. I suppose the remarkable thing was how long it took for me to realize that the things I read that dealt with man's ignorance were applicable to ME," I said, "I somehow thought that I was exempted."

"A common mistake. One sees this all the time. Those most in need of self-ignorance recognition seem to be those who look only for ignorance in others," I said.

"Ignorance sure is easy to spot in others," I said, glassy-eyed, gazing off into the distance as the ignorance of others flashed before my eyes like slide film from an old, school slide projector before the slides of others all morphed into stills of me, saying and doing ignorant things. I dropped my head at the sight of this and added, "It sure is hard to see me up there on the screen."

Both of the ME's present were having the same vision, of course; one of me not appreciating the things spotlighted on the projector screen, and the other me just beside myself with the exposure and revelation of ignorance that, now brought to light, could be corrected.

"Where to begin?" I sighed.

"You've already begun," I said.

"But how do I fix things?" I asked myself.

"You can't fix things that are beyond your grasp. You can only address them differently as they come back into your sphere of influence. You can apply whatever new knowledge and wisdom that has replaced your ignorance, but you can't be too sure. You can only do your best. If you are too confident and curt, you will be relapsing into your old, ignorant ways from which you have just recently been liberated. You don't want that!" I said.

"No, I don't want that. I just don't know what to do," I said.

"You don't have to DO anything, except to not reinforce your own ignorance in the future," I said back.

"But can't I get educated?" I asked.

"By whom would you be educated?" I asked myself, sort of with a snort, "Who can you trust to give you information that you can assimilate into knowledge which when combined with experience will yield wisdom?"

"Then I must educate myself," I said.

"You can certainly do that. But you must always have the TRUTH as your goal, and that is a moving target for humans, based on our perceptions at the time. There is an absolute truth out there; you should always strive for it, even if it leads you to places where you would not go, and not be satisfied until you have apprehended it. You must also be unafraid to admit that the truth you once thought absolute has now shifted itself into a truth that is not the same as when you started. This is not because the truth has changed, but because YOU have changed and can see things now that were once occluded," I said.

I thought about this for a minute. I seemed unable to wrap my arms around it. It was elusive and dangerous. I was not comfortable with the whole idea.

"It might seem to some that I was now basing my faith on a truth that is changing, not absolute. That somehow I was incorporating 'relativism' into my faith, endorsing 'situational ethics' as it were, which I cannot rationally reconcile."

"How it seems to some is not your responsibility. They could be misinterpreting you from within the basis of their own ignorance which they have not yet seen in themselves. And besides that, you are speaking of faith, not knowledge. We cannot be ignorant in our faith. It is our faith.

Faith is not knowledge. Faith is not based on knowledge. Faith is faith. We can only successfully modify our faith as our wisdom increases. We never modify or faith based on information or knowledge, alone."

"You seem somewhat sure of yourself," I said.

"I am at the moment. It may be that I later realize my ignorance about all this and change my mind. The only thing I am certain of is that if we think God has changed, then we should examine ourselves very closely. It is entirely likely that God is not the one changing." I said with a smile.

"I just hope that God shows me mercy in this ignorance of mine, and shows me what He would have me do when my wits fail me and seem to point in separate, diametrically opposite directions," I said.

"Now, the new, ignorant you is starting to come through," I said.

"I thought that the recognition of my own ignorance was the first step of an ascending non-ignorance," I exclaimed.

"Another common mistake," I reminded myself, "one likely to be repeated, often. Keep your eye on this lest it grows within you, unchecked, and becomes a monster you cannot handle."

I just sighed and turned my thought to other things, wondering against all wonder how does one become successful when battling a terminal, unyielding ignorance.

I had access to my own thoughts and could tell what I was thinking. Before I could come up with an answer that would contradict my recent self-revelations, undermining what has been so poignantly taught to me recently, the scriptures were brought to my memory, the words of Jesus, Himself, and I quoted them silently to myself, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you."

I decided to let it lay right there for the moment. Perhaps, forever.

Before I sign off, let me leave myself another quote from another famous Isaac/Izaak.

Izaak Walton, from THE COMPLETE ANGLER.

The person that loses their conscience has nothing left worth keeping.

I think I'll go fishing.



6/25/10 News Overdose

I have overdosed on news, a dangerous thing. I think the world suffers from this malady as well. We have 24 hour around the clock news – it invades our space, assaults our ears, and damages our thinking. We have news (very little) that consists of the facts, but mostly we have news that has been slanted to a particular worldview. I am so tired of learning of the worldview of others in this sneaky manner.

I have my own worldview. It belongs to me. I like the comfort and safety of it and do not like it threatened, though it is safer than one might suppose from the starting tone of this missive. We have statistics (read that as “facts”) reported to us that are cited on the news as evidence of a particular thing, but those statistics reported as facts, upon examination, come from a particular advocacy group, and since the stated function of ANY advocacy group is to bring awareness and relief to the cause being advocated, is it unreasonable to think they would filter the statistics so that only those that advocate their cause be allowed to be visible to those would look? Of course not, since the primary goal of advocacy groups seems to be to advocate for their own survival and prosperity.

I am so tired of being “made aware.” I don’t want to be aware anymore. I want to be an ostrich and hide my head in the sand so that the rest of the world will disappear.

We recently had two egregious examples of advocacy run amok, though the examples of advocacy run-amok-ness are legion.

The European scientific committee charged with the worldwide collection of data on global warming, a term now in the process of being conveniently rehabilitated as “climate change” since the term “global warming” raises the hackles on the backs of so many necks it has become counterproductive, intentionally suppressed data that mitigated the data they chose to release for public and scientific view. This is science turned to politics. Data is data, and evidence is evidence. Those who interpret it have a heavy responsibility to interpret it according to the best scientific means. They do not have the right to filter it. When science chooses to collect, interpret, and release information based on a preexisting belief, that is no longer science, but scientific manipulation for political purposes. This bad behavior finally caught up with the scientific community and they got their hand slapped, but not nearly hard enough.

Then, our current political administration got together several peer-reviewed scientists and experts in oil production and operations, and with a single unilateral out-of-hand move issued a moratorium on offshore drilling because of the Deepwater Horizon incident and made it seem that the peer-reviewed experts has unanimously recommended this action. It turns out that they didn’t recommend this at all. They actually said the opposite, and that stopping production and drilling was less safe than continuing, using the analogy that you don’t ban airplanes because one crashed. It turns out that a federal court overturned the administration’s moratorium on the basis of the skewed language the administration used in the issuance of the moratorium, and further ruled that oil production and services companies that have contracts with the government based on leases and permits already in place cannot be deprived of their rights without due process. The administration is angry over this check on its power and no doubt will seek some favorable court that is apt to rule in its favor. Since our president has already pissed off the Supreme Court in his first state of the union address, he may find manipulation of the judicial system an arduous and unrewarding process. Good for the judicial system if he does.

Thanks, government, for being so helpful as to interpret the data in accordance with your wishes.

I digressed there. I started talking about an overdose of news which led to reports from advocacy groups being reported by the news media as facts which lead to policy, and after having written that, I suppose that is the thing that I am most tired of.

Imagine this exchange at a congressional committee hearing on FDA oversight, about a new, controversial drug a pharmaceutical company wants to get on the market

FDA Congressional oversight committee chairman: *Mr. Pharmaceutical, this committee has reviewed the reports of testing and cost/benefit analysis that have been submitted, and quite frankly has found no evidence that this drug has any benefits whatsoever, produces dangerous side-effects, and is extremely expensive.*

Mr. Pharmaceutical: *But, Mr. Chairman, did you read Section 171.25.678.9115.d.3 Paragraph 4 on page 3,457 of the report that this new drug would be extremely beneficial to the stockholders of the company at large, not to mention significant benefits to me, personally, and offers a wealth of benefits to the medical community since they, like all other businesses, work on a markup percentage of their cost, and the more cost, the more gross margin in dollars. And I would like to point out, if I may, that while the drug might not be particularly effective, the recurring visits of those with the chronic disease this drug was developed to address, not particularly treat, would keep them coming back for years and years for more expensive treatments.*

Mr. Chairman: *We did notice those benefits, but are concerned that they seemed to be lacking in something that was good for the PATIENT.*

Mr. Pharmaceutical: *Obviously, Mr. Chairman, treatment of the patient was an ancillary goal, one on which we had hoped to make more progress than the report indicates, but when we observed that the treatment costs for the mitigation of the serious side-effects alone, using other potent medications, many of which are still under patent by the company, the overall benefit to ourselves and the medical community at large were just too good to pass up.*

Mr. Chariman: *Well you certainly have a good point there.*

Mr. Committeeman #1 [interrupting, and adjusting his glasses in a scholarly, thoughtful gesture]: *Mr. Pharmaceutical, I must ask you about the statistics that have been provided as independent documentation of the efficacy of this drug. Tell us the details about this INDEPENDENT SCIENTIFIC PHARMACEUTICAL STANDARDS RESEARCH INSTITUTE, and why it is that we should accept their findings as fact.*

Mr. Pharmaceutical: *Well, Mr. Committeeman #1, I'm glad you brought that up. The INDEPENDENT SCIENTIFIC PHARMACEUTICAL STANDARDS RESEARCH INSTITUTE was founded by Big East University, and was started as an independent verification organization of research that was to be submitted to the FDA for consideration of approval. It was originally funded by a 3.2 billion dollar direct grant from Congress and had the government's overwhelming support. Big East University, as you are aware, has an impeccable record of scientific achievement, and their commitment to this institute has brought it to the very forefront of modern scientific thought and achievement. After the original grant money ran out, I am proud to report the Institute has been supported, almost unilaterally, by grants to Big East University from the company I represent.*

Mr. Committeeman #1 [looking somewhat uncomfortable now]: *Tell me how it is that the institute can maintain its independence when reporting on a drug being proposed for approval, when the company requesting approval is the same company that underwrites the existence of the institute.*

Mr. Pharmaceutical: *Oh, Mr. Committeeman #1, the institute was created by an act of CONGRESS, and we make no direct contribution to the institute. We merely provide an annual gift to Big East University, in the impressive amount of 1.15 billion dollars. We have no control over how Big East University chooses to use the money, but we have noticed that they very wisely use half of it to support the institute, and the other half they use as they wish. There is no compromise of the institute's independence here, since, as you know, academia is not interested in mere money, and their thoughts and motives are purely in intellectual pursuits in the name of pure science and research. Might I also mention here that this drug has the overwhelming approval of the TRAIL LAWYER'S ASSOCIATION? This is an ancillary benefit that will inject millions of dollars into the economy, and help provide some wealth redistribution in the way of settlements and payments that*

the government thinks is so important right now. Of course, that money will come from the deep pockets of the insurance companies, and not from my company or the government. The insurance companies have plenty of money.

Mr. Committeeman #3 [longing to sound intelligent and now seizing his chance]: *Mr. Chairman, I can vouch for Big East University, since I matriculated there, graduated from Big East Law School, and hold several degrees in addition to my JD, most of which are honorary. You know, they recently completed the COMMITTEEMAN #3 building of the PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANY research park and let me say, as an alumnus of Big East, I am proud that this company here before us, with their impeccable record of service to the medical community was able to make those contributions to Big East which makes a tremendous amount of medical research possible, not to mention that big sky boxe at Big East-Pharmaceutical Company Stadium we all enjoy so much.*

Mr. Chairman [banging his gavel]: *Well, that settles it. With credentials like that, if the INDEPENDENT SCIENTIFIC PHARMACEUTICAL STANDARDS RESEARCH INSTITUTE of Big East University recommends the approval of this drug, who are we mere mortals to interfere? This new drug, known under the trade name of **Avaricium**, is hereby approved, the previous rejection by the FDA notwithstanding.* [banging his gavel again] *This committee meeting is forthwith adjourned.*

Everyone rises to leave as aides toting Blackberries, laptops, and mountains of files and paperwork begin to gather all their belongings and scurry out. The committee members linger, shaking hands and smiling for the cameras, looking important and proud of the significant contributions they make to all of mankind in their work on this committee.

Mr. Pharmaceutical turns to Mr. Chairman and Committeeman #1 and #3 and asks, "We still on for that ten o'clock tee time tomorrow?"

Mr. Chairman, "Sure!"

Mr. Committeeman #1, "And Beni-Hana's tonight?"

Mr. Pharmaceutical, "Oh, yes. Reservations at eight in the private upstairs clubroom. I wouldn't miss it for anything. Bring your wives or your girlfriends, but don't bring BOTH!" Everyone laughed at this except Mr. Committeeman #1 who thought they might have been referring to a particular incident in his recent past. He frowned for a moment, and then decided that this was just innocent good ol' boy fun, and his smile returned.

Mr. Committeeman #3 said, as they were all walking out the door, "Did I tell y'all that Committeeman #3 Junior has been admitted to Big East graduate school this fall? He is going as the recipient of the PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANY FELLOWSHIP, and will be studying abroad his first semester. All expenses paid!"

Mr. Chairman, smiling, a hand on Committeeman #3's shoulder, "A chip off the old block! We know you're proud of Junior."

Everyone smiled and congratulated him, and the sound of laughter could be heard as they exited the committee room, patting each other on the back, their voices trailing off, turning into mere murmurs as they strolled down the hall until finally, not a whisper of a sound could be heard in the now empty room except for the rustle of papers as the custodian began picking them up off the floor, preparing the room for the next day's meeting of the Congressional Investigative Harassment Committee for the Political Wishes of the Administration, a similar committee to the one that investigated Howard Hughes; a committee similar to the one which so correctly accused him of contempt of congress. Ol' Howard and me have that in common, with this difference: If this Congress called me to testify before them, they'd be able to accuse me of contempt before I even got there, because I'd throw a congressional summons in the garbage. They'd have to fetch me; and they would, they certainly would.

CLL? They tell me I still have it. I know that I have been depressed about it as what I have been through for the past year and a half sinks in, even though I am doing well right now. I have never

dealt with any kind of depression before and this is new for me. I am in a funky malaise which is completely unlike any me I have ever experienced before. I used to meet challenges headfirst and just dive in. Now, it seems like I see challenges and just want to shrug my shoulders, and just sit quietly on the front porch. This new me is so unfamiliar, I seem to be merely a distant, almost casual observer of what is going on in me. I am watching it with great interest, though through the lens of a distant resignation. Maybe this new me is the one that just accepts and observes, without wanting to DO. If this is how the new me is, then I don't like it. I want the old me that DID, that thrived on DOING. I seem to have misplaced him somewhere. If you see him, would you let me know his whereabouts, and admonish him to come right back home, where his absence has been noted.

Maybe, like all Mississippians, I just forgot about the humid heat of summer. It is always hotter than our memories of the heat. We should know better than that. Maybe, I'll talk this over with Hemosapien when I go see him on Monday. Maybe he'll have something to say about it other than, "Hmmmmmm."

If I have ever suffered from depression in my life, I am not aware of it. Is this what it is like? I don't know! I've been depressed for a couple of hours many times, a full afternoon on numerous occasions, and a full sleepless night a couple of times, but it never felt like this for this long. I am in uncharted waters, but I am not alone. As our federal government, our Gulf state governments, and the oil companies try to deal with a blowout of a deep-water oil well, they have all realized that they are in uncharted waters. **The script is being written as the play unfolds**. Having just come to that conclusion, the writing of it has made me feel much better. Isn't that simply the way life is?

I do know this. BP's Tony Hayward has had his hands full. He has had his hands so full he lost his presence of mind. He whined that he would like to get his life back. I cannot think of a worse complaint for any human being to have actually had the gall to vocalize. The eleven men who died when the Deepwater Horizon exploded might like to have their lives back, too. I know the families and loved ones of those killed would like to have their lives back. With all the problems he is facing, Tony Hayward should be glad that some big, normally good-natured Louisiana coon-asses haven't looked him up and delivered to him a first class ass-whipping. It'd only take one, but they might like to form their own committee.

I can see them now, all decked out in purple and gold, maybe black and gold wearing their LSU and Saints tee-shirts and perhaps a cap that says, "Burkhalter," or "Halliburton," or maybe "Exxon," making their way from Heathrow airport through the streets of London, their faces white with terror as they zoomed through the city streets with everyone driving on the wrong side of the road, getting out at BP headquarters, and going into the building, their spokesman, in his NOMEX coveralls, an embroidered patch on his breast saying "Kirby Marine," politely saying to the lobby receptionist, a sweat-stained band around the rim of the cap he has taken off his head and holds in his hand as he speaks to her, "Ma'am, my name is Broussard. We yawl here from sout' Loo-zee-Anna, From Laf-FAH-yette, from New Iberia and Breaux Bridge, from Pierre Parte and Labadieville, from Houma and N'awlins, from Plaquemines and Head-of-Island. We come here to see dat tam Tony Hayward! If you would be so kahnd as to fahnd him farrus, we'd 'preciate it, ma'am."

There are things far less plausible! God bless them, each and every one!!

Thursday, July 15, 2010

Uploaded from California!!

I think that is the day! They run together after a while on an extended road trip.

Canaan and I have driven miles and miles (3,700 so far!), and we aren't even at our destination, yet. I really think that perhaps the trip itself was my destination and along the way, I am completing my bucket list (you saw the movie!) That may sound moribund and morose, but it isn't, really. If one has a bucket list, there is no better time than now to make preparations on getting those important items checked off.

Canaan and I left home on Wednesday, July 7 at about 6:30 in the morning. I had the car packed, and I mean packed, like Norwegian brisling in a King Oscar sardine can. To a country boy, those King Oscar sardines were the delicacy only rich people could afford. We usually had to stick to the Lighthouse brand, that had two big slabs of some sardine-like fish. Still, we were glad to get that. Now back to the car: after we had stuffed, pushed, cajoled, browbeaten and otherwise shamed the stuff we were carrying into submission, we were able to get all the car doors shut, but daren't open them again for fear of an explosion. After several kisses to her men from my wife and his mother, Canaan and I were off: North and then West; way, way West.

Our first day was uneventful and long. Our drive was eventually going to carry us through the Badlands in South Dakota, but we didn't have to go that far to get to the Badlands. Just North of the Mississippi line, just across from those two Mississippi Cities, Southaven and Olive Branch, lie the badlands of Memphis, Tennessee. Memphis, the master of the river perched atop her cliff. Memphis, named for the famous river city of old. Memphis, the home of Rock-and-roll. Memphis, that foremost of cities of Tennessee, larger, by far, then her counterparts across the state. Memphis, now reduced to a series of run down buildings, trash on the roads, and an overall post-war scruffiness. It was Canaan's first real thing to see on our trip. He was disappointed in everything but the near the airport area, after I explained o him what a hub of distribution Memphis was. Thank goodness for that. If not for that, what would Memphis be like now? Poor Memphis: She has had to watch Nashville replace heart the foremost city of Tennessee. A sad state of affairs is Memphis.



We crossed the Mississippi river there and headed north on I-55. On through Arkansas and into Missouri, passing through many square miles of soybean and rice fields that were lush and green, into the bootheel of Missouri, and right on through St. Louis. We did not pass through St. Louis, itself, but swept through the suburbs. Canaan asked about the Great Arch that sits on the riverfront, miles away from where we would be passing.

"Have you seen photographs of the Great Arch?" I asked.

"Yes sir," he said.

"Close your eyes then," I ordered. He did. When they were closed (I was driving, of course), I said, "Now, recalling all the photographs you have seen, imagine the Great Gateway Arch perched on the Western bank of the Mississippi River, proudly overlooking the city of St. Louis."

Canaan, his eyes still closed, in apparent deep concentration at working up the vision said, "OK. Got it!"

"Well, that's what it looks like," I said as we sped on northwestward, getting caught by a thunderstorm that was bound and determined to follow us all the way to Kansas City. If my casual dismissal of the famous Gateway Arch raises the ire of the Greater St. Louis Tourism Commission, I'll beg their indulgence. Half of the traveling team enroute to California has seen the great arch on more than one occasion. Between the two of us, we have seen it an average of eight times by my way of reckoning. It is not like the great arch has received no attention at all. Canaan can come back and see it one day, perhaps with his family, and take in a Cardinals game, or perhaps a Rams game.

That devilish thunderstorm was successful in following us all the way to Kansas City. The more I cursed at it, the angrier it became until we were forced to stop a couple of times due to such bad visibility that you could see beyond the windshield wipers, plus there was a hazard of water on the road surface. Canaan drove all the way, and I was coaching him non-stop, much to his consternation. He didn't like it very much and I sure was a bundle of frayed nerves like a cat in a clothes dryer before the rain stopped. Many of the other drivers failed to consider the road conditions. In their haste to continue on with speeds that should be reserved for dry roads and good visibility, they encountered hazards which reminded them of the laws of physics in a most unfriendly way. Tow trucks and Missouri Highway Patrol men were everywhere getting cars out of ditches, picking up pieces of cars, and there were even a couple of Ambulances on the scene. Motor Homes explode like a hand grenade when they hit the ditch and turn over. At one place, there were motor home parts scattered over an acreage that was akin to one of the rice-fields we saw in Arkansas. No ambulances, though. The state troopers and two trucks and sad looking victims wrapped in Space Blankets provided by the Troopers were all milling about/ I'm glad nothing but feelings appeared to be hurt.

As we hit Kansas City, we passed right by the Royals and Chiefs stadiums. Canaan thought this was cool. We saluted Dexter McCluster, the star Ole Miss running back, as we passed through his new home of Kansas City as he begins his career with the Chiefs. We prayed for his good health and prosperity there, and that he would become the star of the Kansas City Chiefs, become a great leader for the team, become NFL Hall-of-Fame material, stay healthy enough to be able to have a long career, help lead the Chiefs to a Super Bowl Victory, let none of that go to his head, always be kind hearted, well-spoken, and a great representative of Ole Miss, looked up to, admired, and emulated by sports everywhere, find a good wife and raise lots of wonderful, well behaved, God-fearing children, and find peace in a relationship with God that would give him the peace and fulfillment that all those other things are just shadows of. There, Dexter - - - Go and get it! There's two of us who prayed that for you. There are others, but we have admitted it publicly. It's yours if you can claim it.



Kansas City, the city of fountains. I wanted to see it, but no time. I had been there on business once before, but even then had no time to see the city. It is also the home of one of my favorite singers, Kathy Chiavola. I waved in her honor as we flew through. We later spent the night in Mound City, Missouri, finding a delightful local motel called Audrey's. It was just what we two tired fellows were looking for. We had driven about 800 miles. That was enough.

The next day, as we passed through Iowa, we learned something about it that is more than anecdotal now. CORN! They plant corn in Iowa. They plant it in the medians and on the shoulders of the road. They plant it right up to the edge of the gas pumps. If they don't sell enough premium gas, they'll pull out the premium tank and plant corn there. IF you happened to be simply standing on a patch of ground that was otherwise unoccupied, someone would no doubt come along and ask you to move so they could plant some corn there.

"Sir, are you going to do something on the nine square feet of personal space you are occupying, or are you going to just stand there and continue to SMOKE that cigarette even though it's bad for you?" an Iowa Johnny-Cornseed-ess might ask me.

"Well, madam, this is the only place left in the entire state of Iowa that one is permitted to smoke. I expect I'll stand here until I finish this cigarette, then maybe I'll have another one!"

She, impatiently waiting, says, "I'd like to plant some corn there, but you're impeding my progress."

"You're going to plant a total of nine square feet of corn. With the thousands of square miles of corn in this state, I am somehow a detriment to a good corn crop in Iowa, and all because of this cigarette I am smoking in the only place I have seen thus far that is permitted to me by the state of Iowa?"

"Ever kernel counts!" she said, undeterred, scratching the ground around my immovable feet, and planting the corn none-the-less. Had I been barefooted, she would have planted corn between my toes, such is their love for corn here.

As we neared Council Bluffs, Iowa, on our way to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, there were a tremendous number of signs saying Council Bluffs Exit so-and-so, and Council Bluffs Downtown, Council Bluffs this and Council Bluffs that, etc. Though we were seeing all those signs, the city I was seeing looming up in the distance was way too large to be any Council Bluffs, Iowa. Finally I saw ONE, count that, ONE sign that said "Omaha I-80 West." As we rounded the bend I realized that right across the narrow Missouri River, was Omaha, Nebraska. Apparently Council Bluffs is so overshadowed in the sphere of influence of Omaha, they prefer to ignore its presence. Seems sort of silly to me. How many folks from Iowa work and earn their livings in Omaha, you reckon? Thousands, no doubt. As we passed along, on my left and to the west, Omaha was so close I could have shot a fat man in the rear end with a BB gun, though no mention was made of that. From where I was traveling, Omaha looked pretty good. All in all, the Council Bluffs/Omaha area was in a beautiful setting, though where there wasn't concrete or pavement, or maintained turf, there was corn.

On North, until we got to Sioux Falls, South Dakota. The ladies at the South Dakota welcome center were very helpful. They gave me more brochures that I could use, despite my protests. Once the nice lady started her spiel, she could not be stopped. I looked all over her for a reboot button. I'm sure I was distracting her as she continued telling me about all the wonderful sights in South Dakota.

"Sir, do you mind? I am trying to tell you all about the wonderful sights here in beautiful South Dakota. You seem to keep looking at me in a most unsettling manner!" She exclaimed.

"I'm sorry ma'am. I was looking to see if you had a reboot button. You seem to be locked in an infinite loop. I must have found it, though. I was beginning to be afraid it was located in an inaccessible location."

"No, that won't be necessary. Now to continue, there are so many beautiful sights here in South Dakota. You'll want to be sure and visit the actual Sioux Falls, and as you travel west,

our fabulous Corn Palace, where every single work of art is made from different colored kernels of corn. And of course, the famous Wall Drug, where you get free ice water."

"I can get free ice water from my ice chest. I just want to see the Badlands and the Black Hills."

"But you simply Must see the Corn Palace and Wall Drug," she said, insistently.

"I've seen enough corn to last me a lifetime."

We left, her head shaking at our callous treatment of her suggestion of visiting the Corn Palace. All the way across South Dakota, in a manner that would shame Burma Shave, we saw signs of the Corn Palace and Wall Drug. Wall Drug this. Wall Drug that. Wall Drug Ice Cream. Wall Drug 5 cent coffee. Wall Drug free ice water. Corn Palace this. Corn Palace that. We even saw DUAL billboards, one half dedicated to the Corn Palace, the other dedicated to Wall Drug. This went on for 300 miles. It's a long way across South Dakota.

The interesting thing was watching the corn thin out and the grasslands appear. Before long, there was nothing but grassland and widely spaced rolling hills. Canaan and I could imagine thundering herds of Bison stomping across the plains. There was an offer to see genuine bison, and every place you could stop that sold food offered Bison burgers.



When we got to the badlands, we detoured South and made as quick a romp through them as we could. Road construction, thanks to the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act, made this more time consuming than we thought. We enjoyed the badlands and were surprised that they were not rock, but just dirt that had been eroded. They are still eroding. If they got more rain out there, the badlands would just melt away into a non-descript dirt pile. We laughed at the signs that warned of Rattlesnakes. We laughed harder at the signs that warned that the Rattlesnakes were real

and not pets. I suppose some tourist from some other country picked one up to have his photo made at one time. I hear that some tourists treat bears in the same manner. Maybe a dim-witted tourist could mistake a wild bear for a tame one, but who would pick up a rattlesnake?? It takes all kinds.

We were going to tour the Black Hills, but decided to just wave at them as we passed through Rapid City. We stopped and ate in Rapid City. We laughed out loud at ourselves as we observed that everyone was passing us on the interstate. We just weren't rapid enough. Going through the Black Hills was beautiful though. I would like to make that a destination some time. Soon the Black Hills were behind us, but the hills continued on into Wyoming. As we approached a sign that said DEVILS TOWER and pointed north, we considered it, but just kept on heading west. After a few



minutes, as we topped some hills and reached a plateau, I looked to the North and there was Devil's Tower, probably 15 miles or so off in the distance. We got out and took some photos. We got to see Devil's Tower after all.

The area around Sundance, Wyoming is the most agreeable area I have seen so far on my trip. Of course, I've only seen it in the summertime, but it was beautiful. It is a place I would consider living, based on my summer pass-through. I could see the snow barriers placed at strategic points around the highway. I suspect that it gets far too cold for me there in the wintertime. I had friends who lived in Custer, South Dakota one time. I suspect Sundance, Wyoming is even colder than my friends said Custer was, since the heights at Custer were about what the plateau elevation was around Sundance. No doubt too cold for this Mississippi boy. But it was beautiful.

Before you knew it, large mountains loomed in the background. It doesn't take long to get from the Black Hills to the Rockies, because that was the Big Horn range looming in the background. We saw snow covered peaks for miles and miles before we got there, winding up at about 9PM in Buffalo, Wyoming, finding a room and bedding down for the night. When we checked in, I tried to get my ASCAP discount at the Comfort Inn, since ASCAP has a discount program with Comfort, Clarion, Quality and Sleep Hotels. Though this program is a constantly touted benefit for us ASCAP members, apparently the only ones who know about it are ASCAP and its members. None of these hotels I have ever tried to use this with have heard of the program.

"No, we don't have a discount program with ASCAP," the lady said. "Are you AAA?"

"No ma'am."

"AARP?" she asked.

"No ma'am."

"NRA?" she asked, hopefully.

"I WAS an NRA member at one time," I said.

"That's good enough for me," she said, trying to be helpful in some way. When she told me the rate, I could see why.

"That'll be \$136.95 plus room tax and occupancy tax," she apologetically said.

"Ma'am," we just wanted to spend the night. We didn't want to purchase an ownership stake in the hotel chain," I said.

"Oh! I'm sorry. I just hate to tell people what the rates are here, but it's summertime, and tourist time. This is a jumping off place for visits to Yellowstone," she said, sadly.

Times sure have changed in the hotel industry. They charge us a hundred dollars for just a cheap room, but give us a free breakfast that's worth about 2 dollars. And for that you have to stand in line in a tiny room with lots of tourists, and tourists children, all hoarded up with no situational awareness that there's anyone else in the room that would like something to eat, too. They seem oblivious to their surroundings. Complete strangers will fight over the last waffle, and will curse each other over the last 3 day old bagel. A 45 dollar motel room is a thing of the past, unless you like to stay in those places frequented by meth and crack addicts. The hundred dollar plus room is here to stay.

Our room at the Comfort Inn in Buffalo, Wyoming was delightful, though. The kind lady hotel clerk, after I explained to her, to no avail, what ASCAP was, and how I was a member, told me about a regular Thursday night bluegrass show at the Occidental Saloon just a block down the

street. Before I could stop her, she was dialing them up telling them that she had a banjo played in her lobby. Before you know it, I was all set up to go and play with this banjoless bluegrassband at the Occidental Saloon.

"Ma'am, I wish you hadn't have done that. I am dead tired. You say that they will start playing in an hour, but by then, I will have been asleep for an hour. I regret that the bluegrass band will be banjoless again this week, but I'm OUT!" I said as I suppressed a yawn. I WAS tired, and nothing was going to keep me from sleeping.

As it turns out, a songwriter friend of mine from Mississippi is friends with the Buffalo Bluegrass Band. I would have been glad to have made his acquaintance, but I was just beat. Though I am feeling more and more like my old self, when I run out of steam, I am out of steam.

Rising early the next morning, we continued west, through Cody and Gillette, Wyoming, then on into Montana. Now be prepared for this: When you get to Eastern Montana, you are just scratching the surface. It's a long, long way across Montana. Billings, or "Billin" as the locals say, is a long way from the Little Bighorn Battlefield site. Missoula is a long way from Billings. Everything is a long way from everything else. The sky is big there.



Our first stop in Montana was the Little Big Horn Battlefield Site. All I can say about that is that Custer was a fool. We looked the battlefield site over, particularly the site of the Last Stand. We were able to make our own decisions about what happened here. We were told to go in to the Interpretive Center and listen to the Native American guides tell their stories about the battle, but I resist any Interpretive Center. Who is going to Interpret anything for me? I looked at the battlefield site and came up with my own conclusions. Custer attacked a vastly superior number of Indians as they

were camped on the Little Big Horn river. He was a fool. There is no need to interpret the plight of the plains Indians to me. The plight of the Choctaw, the Chickasaw, and the Cherokee was no different; it just happened much longer ago. I am no more responsible for this than I am for slavery. I will not feel guilty about any of it. As millions and millions of Mexicans leave their homes and come to this country to work and hopefully to prosper from the opportunities afforded them here that are not available to them at home, I cannot feel sorry for any people who do not avail themselves of the same opportunities. Worse than the stealing of their lands, becoming dependent on the government, and the government offering them that dependency was the greatest curse of Native Americans, if not smallpox and syphilis. I have heard and read numerous treatises on the remarkable horsemanship of the Native American warrior, but seldom any mention that horses did not exist in North America prior to the arrival of the Spanish. Europeans brought the horses that enable the Native Americans to become mobile, no longer living in peace within the confines of their ancestral lands, but coveting and envying the lands of other tribes. While Native Americans may have behaved nobly when dealing within his own tribe, they were ruthless when encountering members of other tribes. Murder, rape and pillage were a day's work during intertribal raids; even the murdering of children who

would grow up to breed and make new warriors. It was a hard life. It was not an easy life. It was not so noble and romantic as it is painted today. Before the arrival of the Spanish, they went everywhere on foot. After the arrival of Europeans, their days were numbered. It is regrettable and mournful, but I cannot romanticize any more than I can romanticize the noble South and the Southern cause. The South fought a war and lost. Even though they fought valiantly, they lost. None questions the courage of Native American warriors, or of Southern or Union Cavalry. The Indians lost. The South lost. Custer lost. I will not wax romantic about it, nor make any of it more noble than it was. The responsibility rests on the shoulders of men long dead. It is not mine and I will not accept it.

In the history of mankind, every time stone met steel, stone lost. Someone will wield steel against us one day, and we will lose. If we think it cannot happen to us, we are deluding ourselves. It happened to Rome; but in these modern times it cannot happen to us. If anyone really believes that modern times are any different today than modern times in any other time, they are further deluding themselves. Today's modern is yesterday's science fiction, and tomorrow's quaint history of a simple people, living in the delusion of their own enlightenment. It's easy to see through the lens of history. I wonder why we can't seem to remember history, or why it is that we think its lessons are not applicable to us. We are just as foolish as those who came before us; perhaps more so.

My visit with Greg Boyd and his family in Missoula must wait until I can write it in great detail. We had a wonderful time there. Then there is our wanderings in California. The Sweet's Mill Music Festival starts tomorrow. IT is located high in the sierras. I probably will be off line for a few days.

More Later!!!!

By the way, I neglected to mention that July 4 was my 53rd birthday. When you have CLL, another birthday is a good thing. Another birthday is a good thing even if you DON'T have CLL.

We did not stop for that free ice water at Wall Drug, nor did we see the Corn Palace. Somehow, I do not feel like I have neglected myself in any way. I'll ask Canaan and see if he feels like I have slighted him.

7/16/10 Remedy for Can't Sleep

This is the second night I have awakened at midnight, springing awake, ready for the morning. Canaan was still up watching TV.

"What time is it?" I asked, rising from my bed.

"Midnight," he said.

"Dang! Well, I'm up and ready for some coffee," I said, already moving towards the coffee pot.

"Well, I'm going to sleep," he muttered, throwing the TV remote over onto my bed.

Rather than watch that TV, I've got duties that need to be attended to. Namely, duties like writing in my blog which I enjoy so much. Once I get started, it'll be morning before I know it. Time just flies when I get absorbed in my writing.

As I stated before, telling about the trip to Greg Boyd's house will take me some time. We arrived at Greg's house on Friday, July 9, and departed on Monday, July 12. Not only are Greg and I friends from back home in Meridian, we are both banjo players, both interested in vintage musical instruments (That is how he makes his living), and he is an excellent guide for the sights in the country of Western Montana and Northern Idaho, since he came there 30 years ago as a fire jumper with the Forest Service and never left. He and his gracious wife Laurie were wonderful hosts. Here is a link to his website: <http://gregboyd.com/>

We first had some business to attend to. I had brought several instruments to get Greg to sell for me. They were all excellent instruments that I would never play. It was time to turn them loose, put them back on to the market, and hopefully in the hands of people who are musicians who will make enjoyable music for the listeners of the world. Three excellent banjos and two excellent guitars were left with Greg for sale. He has a world-wide business.

Our first night, Greg and Laurie took us downtown in Missoula to a restaurant called Ciao Mambo. They have excellent Italian food. The music was too loud, though. They had Frank Sinatra blaring far too loudly, and the crowd was trying to talk over the top of the music. We



glass in my food to go along with the pepper. Too much red pepper is one thing, broken glass is another.

"The top on your pepper shaker came off. As you can see, it hit the plate and broke, and there is glass in my food. I cannot eat it!" I said.

She peered at the broken glass in my plate of pasta and said, "I will go and tell the manager and get them to make you a new plate. It'll be just a few minutes." And she was off.

This manager was the same one who thought the too loud music was good for his restaurant. Maybe he thought the glass seasoning would add some spice to the food. He waitress came right back and said my new plate would be out in about 10 minutes. When the plate came back, it also contained sautéed mushrooms to go with the prosciutto. Was this an added bonus? Or did they not make it right the first time? Or does their recipe vary with the whim of the chef? In any case, it was excellent, and I enjoyed every bite, though the sauce was a bit runny. I read some reviews on this restaurant, and it seems that too loud is a common complaint, and it turns out that it is not a franchise, but an expending chain headquartered in Whitefish, Montana. I wish them luck. They be more enjoyable if they could make it so that their guests could enjoy each other, rather than Dean Martin and Fran Sinatra turned up way too loud. After that it was back to Greg's house and lights out for me.

I was up EARLY for mountain time. About 3:00AM, but I had everything I needed: My camp coffeepot and coffee fixings. If I have that, I can pass a whole night and morning without having to disturb anyone. Greg roused about 7:00AM and we took off down to the farmers market in downtown Missoula where I met several of Greg's friends. We ate something at nearly every booth and enjoyed every bite. Everything was fresh, organic, and delightful to look at as well as eat. As I looked in the parking lot for the farmer's market, I saw that every other car was a Subaru. They like those Subaru's out here in the west. I suppose the 4 wheel drive is what makes them so popular. Of course, everyone was impressed that the Nissan Murano that I was driving had more ground clearance AND 4 wheel drive. If Debbie saw some of the places we would be up taking her Murano, she would have a fit. It is all time 4 wheel drive, but with the push of a button, it'll lock them in for positive traction 4WD. It'll climb a hill like nobody's business. It has climbed many since we left home. It's going to climb a few more before we get back.



After the Farmer's Market, we went back to Greg's house. By that time, Chad, Greg's helper and mandolin go to guy was there. We decided we'd better get the instruments I brought checked in and described for sale. That took us a while as they had to be expertly inspected by Greg and Chad, and described accurately for listing on his website. No monkey business here. When you have a reputation to protect, you want to make sure that the folks you are selling to are getting what you sold them. Greg has always been, and still is, a man of impeccable character. I would like to say that we are a lot alike after that statement, but I'll have to leave that to others.

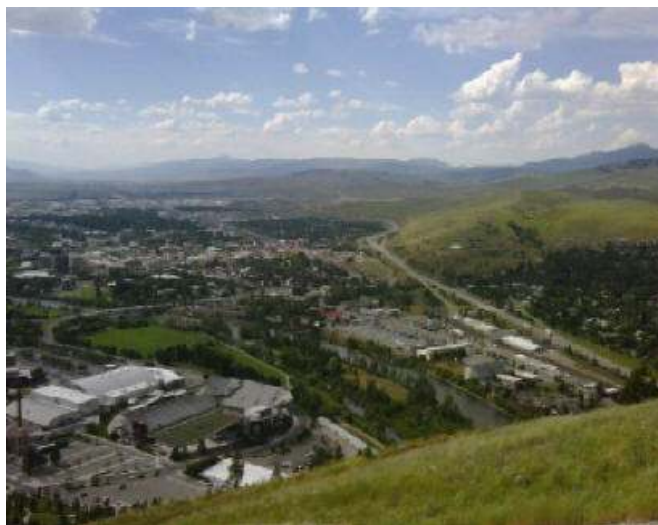
The day's work being done, we then settled in to doing nothing. Canaan decided he would take a walk to the top of the high hill that had an "M" for Montana.. Back home, cities love to plant shrubbery in a manner that spells out the name of the town. Out west, they just like to put the town's initial on a high hillside. Sometimes you can see more than one initial for different towns in the same view. After quite a while I got a text from Canaan saying that this climb to the top of the hill was more difficult than he thought it was. At the time he sent the text, he

was certain that he was more than halfway there. Turns out that he was just a quarter of the way there. I have posted a couple of his photos I stole off his facebook page. One shows the M from Greg's house. The other shows the view he got as a result of his hard work.

Some time later, another text came in saying that this had been hard work, but he had made it and was enjoying the view. Isn't that the way it's supposed to be. We work hard to climb to the top . . . shouldn't we enjoy the view once we get there?

When he got back and had a shower, we loaded up and went downtown to get the best burritos I have ever eaten. I don't even remember the name of the place, but they had burritos as tightly wrapped as the tortilla could stand, and every bite was delicious. On our return, we made plans for the next day, which was a trip up into the mountains.

I am done now. I'll save the mountain trip and photos for later. It's off this morning to Sweet's Mill, the real reason I am in California. If I can get a cell phone signal up there, I'll be sure and write every day.



July 17, 2010 At the California Folk Music Fest

Yep, Canaan and I are here, but I must finish telling you about the trip before I get to the music fest.



On Sunday, July 10, with Greg as our guide, Canaan and me went up into the mountains in Montana and Idaho. It was absolutely beautiful. We went places in my wife's car that she would make her livid if she knew, so don't say anything. That skiing area of the west is very fond of Subaru's. They are everywhere! But the higher ground clearance of my Nissan Murano, and the full-time 4WD with a 4WD LOCK feature makes it an excellent mountain car. Still, Debbie wouldn't like it a bit if she could see some of the roads it has been on.

Idaho is not like I expected. It is far more beautiful. Until I looked at the map, I did not realize how far North we had gone into Idaho. We were way on up there. Greg said he like the hillbilly part of Idaho better than the Southern Part. I can see why.

Monday morning, it was time to head on West, working our way further South, to our ultimate goal of California. I have always wanted to make the drive from Elko, Nevada, through Reno and Carson City, to Lake Tahoe. It is a long was from Missoula to Elko. We did it all on two lane roads, as Greg advised, until we got to Boise. Though it was a long day, the beauty of the drive was worth it. We had said our goodbyes to Greg and Laurie the night before. Greg insisted that we wake him and he would make us breakfast before we hit the road. This was most kind and gracious, but we snuck out before daybreak and were far along the road before anyone roused at the Boyd house. I had already warned Greg that this is most likely what I would do. I stuffed a sleepy Canaan into the car and off we went.

Around every bend was mountainous beauty. How do I describe it other than that? It was beauty without failure. It was beauty without compromise. It was beauty without ceasing . . . until we got near to Boise, which is just a city, like every other city. The part we drove through was the par that had been developed in the last 15 years or so as real estate boomed everywhere. The subdivisions were all the same. The houses looked like houses in newly developed areas everywhere. They obviously had passed an ordinance that prohibited anything but minimal signage, so it looked as much like Madison and Ridgeland, Mississippi as it did Boise and Meridian, Idaho. It this what America wanted? It looks like every other new place in America. It had no character: at least the part we got to see.

Perhaps I am unfair in my description of Boise. All I can describe is what I saw. The part that I saw looked like everywhere else. I'm sure that there are parts with much character, but I didn't get to see them. I do have one funny story, though. We stopped at a Perkins restaurant in a sort of new shopping center. It looked like every other new shopping center in every other town in America. When the waitress seated us and asked what we'd like to drink, of course, the first thing she asked was, "Where are you guys from?"

We said, "Meridian?"

She said, "No Way!"

Then we added, "Mississippi," and she laughed and said that she knew it couldn't be Meridian, Idaho.

Character in the look of Boise? I didn't see it. I'm sure it's there somewhere. I know it's there in the blue football field of Boise State, but that is character of a sort of which Canaan doesn't approve.

I asked him, "Wanna go see that blue football field at Boise State?"

He gave me a look that would curl your hair. He does not like that blue field. He says that is unnatural. I reminded him that the new artificial grass (Astroturf is a thing of the past) on the field at Ole Miss is unnatural. He replied that at least it's green.

Soon, Boise was a memory and we settled further and further into high altitude desert as we now moved along on the interstate. No more two lane roads.

It was still a long way to Elko. And when we got there, we were able to see that this was a city that had some flavor. Parts of it were Boise-esque, and everywhere else-esque, but parts were earthy and genuine.



One of the things I have noticed on our trip is the proliferation of casinos. They seem to be everywhere. If there aren't casinos, then the state runs a lottery. I guess Alabama is the only state left that has no form of legalized gambling. Surely there are some others (Utah??). I'm really not interested enough to go and find out, but for certain, all along the way here, there were casinos; if not state licensed, then casinos in tribal lands. The number of casinos we did not gamble in was legion. Attached is a photo Canaan took with his Blackberry out of the car window. This Harrah's Casino at Lake Tahoe is one of the many that did not see any of our money. Gambling can be fun, but it is an expensive

form of fun. It has ruined many a person and family. And for what??

The expanse of high altitude desert from Elko to Reno looked just like I thought it would. On a map, Nevada seems to show a whole lot of nothing. I am always interested in what that nothing looks like. I suppose next I'll be wishing to see central Nevada, which is the only place left in Nevada I have never been. Much of that one can't even get to, but the drive from Reno to Las Vegas, or from Elko to Las Vegas is now intriguing to me. Reno was Reno. There were lots of Casinos there that did not claim any of our money.

We stopped for a bite in Carson City and observed extremely loud and rudely behaved teenagers. This can happen anywhere, of course, but I am always shocked at loud, foul language in a public place. The language was no fouler than we hear at home, but it certainly was louder. There will be more on loudness later.

From Carson City, we drove on to South Lake Tahoe. It was as commercial as any Nevada casino town, and was a tourist trap like so many others, with this exception: Lake Tahoe was a near religious experience to me. I cannot explain it now, the experience being too close on me.

I am nearly reduced to tears as I write this. I will explain later about my attraction to and affinity for Lake Tahoe. I am unable to continue. . .



Later: From a purely geographical standpoint, the things that look like low hills in the background are nearly 30 miles away. They are actually the High Sierras coming right down the crystal water's edge. I cannot even explain the geography of Lake Tahoe right now.

Even later: Canaan and I made it to Oakhurst, California the next day. I used my TomTom navigator and kept making it select alternative routes until it gave me what appeared to be curvy mountain roads. It was right, and they certainly were. The route I had inadvertently selected took us right through Yosemite National Park. I was not aware of that when I selected the route. I knew

we would be in its vicinity, but not through it. We had planned to go there the next day, but found ourselves at the gate on the road that was taking us to Oakhurst, where our hotel reservations were. It would be pointless to turn around. Though there was some traffic, it did not seem to be as bad at the gate as I was prepared for it to be. I was later to learn that most people come in to Yosemite from the South entrance, not the North. Traffic??? There was plenty. There was too much. With the road construction financed by the American Recovery and Reconstruction Act, Barack H. Obama, President, it was absolutely awful.

It was also beautiful. And through all the beauty, let me assure you of one thing: In spite of all of the National Geographic photographs you have seen (fabulous), and the coffee table photography books of america's natural wonders (even more fabulous, and the Ansel Adams platinum/palladium prints (the most fabulous), let me assure you that you are not prepared for the dynamic scale and space and wonder of what you will experience when you round one bend and see El Capitan, Half-Dome, and Bridalveil Falls all in one, incredibly scaled, breathtaking vista. It will catch you by surprise. You will feel like your pants have fallen to the ground. Your jaw will hang slack and continue to do so until you drool, drunk on the heavenly vision that sweeps before you. You will turn in the first parking area. You will rush to get your camera and take a photograph of something of which no photograph can do justice. You will learn, later, that if Ansel Adams cannot fully capture it in a photograph, you will not do so with your point and shoot digital camera, or your Nikon; yet you will do so anyway.



Then, you will realize that you are beset with worrisome tourists. You are one, to, of course, but that is different. You want to appreciate the majesty of this place, but everyone is in your way. They are speaking Japanese. They are speaking German, Urdu, or Hindi, or Uzbeki, or some other language. You don't care, they are all just n your way. The more you wait for the crowd to thin out, the more busses and cars seem to turn into the same parking lot, until there is no room for anyone. There is nothing but a sea of still cameras, video cameras, and smiling

faces, rebukes to children, and loud talking, in the midst of majesty. Of course, I exhibited none of those behaviors, me being the superlative tourist.

I am being facetious. I am guilty of all the things described above but the noise. I wanted silence, but it was impossible. I wanted to be alone with view, but that was not possible either, since everyone there also wanted that view, and it was, by their every right, their view, too. But I didn't want them; nevertheless, they and the view was what I had.

We enjoyed it immensely though, asked another tourist to take our picture with the view in the backdrop, which I was glad to get.

"Canaan, do you want to actually go down into the Yosemite Valley, or have you seen enough for today?" I asked.



"I think I've seen enough. What we are looking at is what we really wanted to see," he said.

"Yep. Let's get out of here!"

That was easier said than done. All the road construction in Yosemite was being done from the valley to their South entrance, which was the way we were going. Due to a flagman right at the parking lot, which was at the entrance of a tunnel, it took us nearly half an hour to get OUT and go South, since more and more people were pouring IN, the rest of them trying to get out of the parking lot continuing North. The exit was not set up to take folks

South. It was a problem for us and the road construction crew. The 30 mile trip South was designed to favor the mountain of traffic moving North, and a one lane mountain road is a slow go. It was a horrendous drive out. So glad were we when we got out that we decided not to go back the next day. Enough of those gawking tourists. Enough of those noisy people. Enough of the awful traffic. I say this laughing at myself.

We we glad we went? Of course. Are we glad it's behind us? Equally.

When we got checked into the motel, we decided (actually I decided) that we would go to Kings Canyon National Park and Sequoia National Park, just a bit to the South. When the next morning came, I looked at the map again, recalled our previous experience with two national parks (Yosemite and the Badlands) and decided against it. Just a few curvy, unpaved miles of mountain road from the motel was a grove of giant sequoias and redwoods called Nelder Grove. The trees there were no doubt not as spectacular as those in the National Parks, but they were certain to be less crowded. Off we went.

Nelder Grove was spectacular. It was spectacular enough for me, that's for sure. Did I miss something by not going to the National Park? I certainly missed the crowds. As it turned out, our first choice of a trail to hike among the trees turned out to be a bad one. There was a family of six people and two dalmations (Mom, Dad,



Grandma, Aunt So-and-so, a toddler and a child in a stroller and those two large dogs. As we could hear from their conversations, they were not on a day trip, but an extended trip. We not only could hear their conversations, there seemed to be five separate conversations going on among the six people, the only one not conversant being the child in the stroller. Can you imagine being on an extended family extended trip and carrying two damn Dalmatians with you, having to find motels that will allow this, having to feed, walk, water, and clean up behind them? For the life of me I cannot understand why people do this? Do they think the dogs enjoy the view, or the vacation? Dogs are just dogs. They think like dogs. They looked pretty stressed to me, and the dad trying to secure their harnesses (not collars) looked pretty stressed as the mom barked instructions to him about the dogs and Aunt So-and-so asked the toddler repeatedly didn't he need to go potty because there was not another one on the trail, and couldn't he just try even though he didn't need to. The trail was only 50 yards long. They could have let the toddler run naked and potty at will, which is exactly what the dogs were going to do. Too much noise. Too much noise.

Here, in the midst of these gallant and majestic trees, I was being pressured to be silent. Canaan felt it, too. Whatever it was in the majesty of these trees that was demanding our respectful silence, it went unnoticed by the family on the trail with us. We did not want to travel this trail anywhere around them. We turned around and left, selecting another trail just a bit further down the road. There was no one there but Canaan and me.

We hiked down the short trail in silence and were just content to be among these trees, trying to hear in the silence what they seemed to be saying to us. Perhaps it was that the trees were saying that they were old when the nation was young. Perhaps it was that the trees were saying that they were old when Europe was young. Perhaps it was that the trees were saying, "Just slow down and be. Be quiet. Be still. Don't make so much noise. Don't be so hasty." They certainly were saying something. I think it was a combination of the above. It was intimidating at first, to be in their presence, but they gradually warmed up to us when they saw we were willing to be still, and in the silence of the grove, I think Canaan and I got it. What was it that we got? I can't tell you. You'll have to get it for yourself. I'm sure it's different for every person. It was sure different for that family of six. It was sure different for the two Dalmatians. I'm sure they treasure every memory they have of that experience.

We then made a trial run to the festival area so that we would know how to get there the next day. It was not far from our motel and a beautiful drive.

We then had the rest of the afternoon off to lollygag about. We enjoyed each other's company.

The next thing I write about will be the magic of this place we are camped in, and this wonderful gathering of people at this place called Sweet's Mill.

7/18/10 This California Fest-Fer-All

This place is a magic place. It has been here a long time. Somehow, through the miraculous working of human interconnections, I found myself invited to come here. Others try to come, and they can't get in, but must first work as busboys, dishwashers, laborers and fetch-alls for as long as three years before they will be allowed to become regular attendees. Apparently the list of those wanting to come is long. Again, through the marvelous ways of providence and fortune, here I am, as a performer on the bill at the Cantina. I cannot even mention the name of this place at this time, since it is a private event; and for a private event, it sure is a large one.

There are people here who have been coming to this place for as long as I have been alive, and legions who started coming here in the sixties, during the folk music boom. It became an anchor for the California Folk Music scene, the professionals, those who made this music their avocation, those who were just learning to play, and those who just wanted to listen. They apparently came here in an idyllic frame of mind, which, though impractical in our real-world, everyday lives, is evident in all those I have thus far met here as their frame of mind while in this place.

There are people in their eighties here. Multitudes in their 70's, 60's, and 50's. The 40 30 and twenty-something crowd cannot be easily counted. There are teenagers and there are toddlers. There are single campers, and there are whole extended families. Amidst all that, Canaan and I have been made to feel most welcome; a true, warm, welcome. We hear of Southern hospitality, and as a Southerner, I know this to be true. It would be embarrassing to me to think that someone, for just about any reason, had thought that I was inhospitable. While I can't speak for California in general, I can vouch for this place. The hospitality it has shown to me and my son has known no bounds.

Of course, our lovely friend, Rita, is here. She is also the reason that we are here. I would not have known about this place except for her. When she visited my home during Ed Dye's memorial celebration, of all the other musicians that were there, I was the only one she invited to come to this place. Perhaps I was the only one interested in the passion she seemed to show about this place. Perhaps it was because I indicated that I might like to come to a place like this. I cannot remember, though this is certain: a turn of the knob sure helps open the door.

I have met Mayne, Gail, Bob, Fiddlin' Will, Larky, Lini, Peter, George, a delightful fellow who plays a hurdy gurdy and his wife who plays the accordion, and a legion of others, all gracious to me. If you have never heard a hurdy gurdy and an accordion played together, with impeccable timing and taste, and listened to the drone of the hurdy gurdy's strings, as that drone, that drone, so precious to and sought after by the human spirit pulls your spirit in to a place where the inside seems bigger than the outside, and heard the rhythmic pull and push of the accordion, making the chords and being percussive at the same time, you have missed out. Is your life less complete if you haven't heard this? Only you can answer that, and anyone might rightfully answer that their life is no less complete. I would have answered the same way, but I cannot do that any longer; I have heard it now. Though not loud, the power of the music, the soft music, struck a chord in me that itself was powerful. I was overwhelmed. It is easy to be overwhelmed here. I can't think of a single thing that would be better than to spend several days in a place where being overwhelmed by music and art, and also overwhelmed by people who are kind, gracious and soft-spoken who are working together in a way to make something wonderful for everyone to share.

The realities of this place are this, though: this does not happen without a lot of human input and work. There is planning. There is preparation. There is much to do, and always things to

do which have not been done. There is much human interaction to get this to happen. There are committees, those dreaded committees! There are those who feel their job is to advise, who feel shunned when their advice is not taken. There are those who never offer advice in the planning stage, but who are vociferously critical after the fact. There are those who say they will do and then don't. There are those who say they won't and they do (God bless them!) There are those who are literal dynamos of human energy and endeavor, who will try to everything unless someone stops them. There are those who push, and those who pull; and some who do this simultaneously on the same object, wondering why the work seems so hard. There are veterans who want to continue to do things the way they used to be done. There are newcomers with good ideas who question the logic behind the defense of, "Well that's the way we've always done it!" There are nurturers. There are exhorters. There are backbiters. There are murmurers and complainers. There are those who have a vision greater than any single point of their desire. There are those who know the synergy that can and will happen when the sum of the pieces, so seemingly tiny as they are counted and reviewed by those who count and review, come together in spite of all the difficulties mentioned, and give us all something much, much larger than the sum of those parts. This is the way humans work. We plow, we sow, we till, we water, we sweat, we reap, but through it all, God gives the increase.

I have made some friends here that I will keep the rest of my life; Mayne, Gail, Peter, Ray, Mitch, Markie, so many others. One of my goals was to come to California and meet some PEOPLE, not just see the natural beauty that is California. I have seen natural beauty that overwhelms. I have heard music that overwhelms. I have met people who have become friends in a miraculous way, more than mere acquaintances. That can happen when you have time to talk, time to sit, no TV to distract, and the ability to communicate with each other with more than words, but through the powerful medium and universal language of music. The hustle and bustle of everyday life seems like a distant, unpleasant memory, but one to which we know we will have to return, and soon. But today?? Today is here and now. Today I am in this place. It is early in the morning, and I am not waiting for the magic to happen at some later point in the day, I am experiencing the magic right now, as I sit here at this computer and try to explain it to you. But words cannot do it. I am failing to explain this place. I am not ashamed that words fail me as I write this, I don't think anyone else's words could explain it any better. Though words are very powerful tools, there are times when they just can't get the job done. This is one of those times.

It's Sunday morning. I must offer this prayer for myself and all those who will come into my sphere of influence today: *Heavenly Father, help me to be the person that I want You to think I am. Help me to show the grace and love that You have shown me. Help me to do and say the things You would have me say. Help me realize that in Your presence I have much to be humble about. Help that humility follow me everywhere I go. And help me always seek Your truth. Give me the wisdom to know the right thing and the courage to do it. Help me to continue to know the joy of Your presence, and the overwhelming joy with which You have filled me. Help me to be continually mindful of the needs of others, and how I might serve You by serving them. Thank you for everything You do for me, those things that are seen, and those things that are unseen. Thank You for this day. In the name of Jesus, Amen.*

7/20/10 Mo' Magic

This is a magic place. I think I may have already said that. The magic comes from the fact that this is a private festival. It is not advertised to the public, nor is it open to the public. I have never seen such a thing. This is a community of musicians and music lovers who had an annual camp grow into a 10 day festival of music, workshops, art, children's activities, consisting of artists and musicians from all over the world. Mississippi has never seen such.

I have taken photos, but cannot publish them here without the permission of the people who are the photo's subjects. I have shot some video, but it is only for my own personal consumption.

I can mention my son, Canaan. He is having a large time. New friends, new activities, California weather, exotic types of music, real belly dancers from the middle-east or of middle-eastern descent (I think he REALLY likes them), and the exploration of different cultures. Though he already knew this (because I have made sure of it), he is experiencing the fact that the rest of the country and the world is much larger than Mississippi!

10/5/10 Not the Same

Note: This was started on 8/18/10. I am still writing on it as of 10/3/10. There have been many distractions in the intervening time. Some of our adventures have been previously published, so a bit may seem redundant.



My trip out west changed me. Maybe I was already changing. Maybe the trip was the catalyst that precipitated the change. Maybe traveling with my son for so long changed me. Maybe it was the fact that I was cigaretteless. Maybe it was the climate. Maybe the altitude. Maybe the people. Maybe the music. Maybe it was the poignant fact that I was steadily checking things off my bucket list; as I was doing so, the list was getting shorter and shorter. I think that's it.

Whatever it was, getting things checked off one's bucket list is important, and without any mental reservation, I can say that I preferred my travel partner, Canaan, to any Jack Nicholson or Morgan Freeman. Don't get me wrong, I admire the work of Jack and my fellow Mississippian, Morgan; but there is no shortage of pleasantness or witty repartee with Canaan Sharp as your travel mate. I think he may have been particularly indulgent of his father as he became more aware that I

as checking wonderful things off this morbid list I was carrying my head.

That is why I can talk about Lake Tahoe now. I suppose of all the places on the earth I wanted to see, it was first and foremost Lake Tahoe. Just think: Istanbul is SECOND to Lake Tahoe. A radical and surprising diversion overtakes this narrative, as belligerently, the massively ancient Istanbul just pushes the subtle, serene beauty of Lake Tahoe aside like a sumo wrestler handling a chili-dog.

"Why would anyone want to go to ISTANBUL?" you ask yourself right now, for which I have prepared the perfect answer.

"Why not?"

Istanbul, formerly Constantinople, and of late, Byzantium, stands at the gateway between East and the West. It is Eurasia's St. Louis. It was St. Louis-esque before my all-time baseball hero the legendary Dizzy Dean played for the Cardinals. It was St. Louis-esque before there was a gateway arch in St. Louis. It was St. Louis-esque before there even was a Missouri town called St. Louis. It was St. Louis-esque before there was a European discovery of America. It was St. Louis-esque before Constantine became the emperor of Rome. It was St. Louis-esque before there was any Louis canonized by the Roman church. It was the place from which St. Louis took its cue. Perhaps St. Louis is ISTANBULISH rather than Istanbul being St. Louis-esque. Istanbul was old and fat, worldly and curmudgeonly, before any of the aforementioned comparisons, perched on its throne astride two continents, sitting there and taking a toll on all who passed, growing fat and wealthy as tremendous amounts of commerce passed through her ports; merchants, taxing authorities, and currency exchanges, each taking its toll and

share of the profits for the values they added, or worse, the values they did NOT add, but extorted. Can you imagine how difficult it was to deal with Longshoremen and Teamsters, working strictly for the Emperor of Rome, or later, the Caliphate? I'll bet Istanbul was like every large city I've ever been to, except worse: As long as you keep moving, you're OK, but the minute you stop, it starts costing you money. While MOVING costs SOMETHING, it is the STOPPING that is really expensive, because in a large city, every postage stamp sized piece of real-estate is rented for the dearest of prices; if you occupy it for an instant, someone is instantly on-the-spot collecting for its usage.

"Did you want park you ship here, sir?" the parking attendant at the Istanbul west-bank wharf asked the merchant captain. (The difficulties and dangers of this exchange can be imagined by the reader in these pre-radio days!)

"Yes, I'll need to park her here and unload a few items of freight, take on some fresh water and food, and pick up a large consignment of freight to take back to ports of call along the North African coast," the merchant captain replied.

"Oh, you want to get her unloaded, re-load and take on supplies, too?" the wharf attendant asked.

"Yes, that's the general idea," confirmed the captain.

"Well, get her on in to the dock with the help of the Istanbul ROW-ROW-ROW YOUR-TOWBOAT Union, and I'll get the Istanbul Longshoreman's Union to get you set up to get unloaded, and then we'll get the Caliph's Ship's Chandler down here for your official supply order, then we'll get the Caliph's official money exchangers down here to arrange for an exchange of funds, or convert your specie into local currency for you to make your purchases and pay for our services, then we'll call in Chandler's Handlers Local #635 to get your supplies brought on board," said the wharf parking attendant.

"Do you have any idea how long any of this might take?" asked the merchant captain, "I really need to get this ship moving. The cost of this crew is killing me."

"Oh, it could take as long as 30 days," said the wharf parking attendant, "As you can see on your wharf parking ticket, you are number 30, and it takes about a day to handle each ship, get her unloaded, re-loaded and re-supplied."

"30 days!!!" gasped the Captain.

"Yes, and unfortunately, the daily dock parking fees just keep on piling up. Say, what type of cargo are you unloading here?"

"Just some livestock and some fresh fruit we brought in from the Southern coast of Spain," said the Captain

"Hmmmm. SPANISH fruit, did you say?"

"Yes," the Captain said, but quietly, now wishing he had not answered so fast, beginning to smell a rat.

The wharf parking attendant replied, "There is a tariff on the importation of fruit from Spain. I'll have to get the Caliphate Tax Collector down here to inventory your cargo and collect the tariffs."

Rolling his eyes, the merchant Captain said, "Never mind. This'll cost a fortune, I'll just keep on sailing, turn around, and head back to where I came from."

"You can do that if you'd like," said the wharf parking attendant, but you have already incurred all these charges and owe them whether you stop or not, and we will collect before you depart,

so you may as well let us all go ahead and do our jobs," said the wharf parking attendant, very matter-of-factly, "And by the way, I don't see an Istanbul Coast Guard D.O.T. sticker or registration number on the bow of your vessel. I am required by law to notify the Istanbul Coast Guard and get them down here for an inspection and certification of your boat."

Sighing, the Captain said, "I suppose that will cost me something, too!"

"Oh, yes," said the Wharf parking attendant, "But those charges are collected directly by the thugs, er, uh, I mean, inspectors who actually board your vessel to do the inspecting and not included in the dock charges. They will only accept gold or in kind payment from your cargo, but the in-kind charges are taken from your cargo BEFORE they are posted on the tariff ledger here, so it's really quite a bargain, all things considered."

The wharf parking attendant continued, "Truthfully, we take about 70% of your cargo, and 85% of your money, and hold you hostage until you forfeit these things willfully, then we give you some fresh water and food, send you on your way, but you get to keep your ship; but we do all this in the kindest, most professional manner."

"Thanks so much," said the Captain, adding, "Your professionalism and courtesy during all this thievery is very much appreciated. Do you think that if I gave you ALL of my cargo and ALL of my money, we could get all this done TODAY, and not have to wait for as long as 30 days?"

"I believe we can serve you in that, that is, everything but the Istanbul Coast Guard inspection, but maybe I can send a message over there and ask them to delay their arrival. If we can get you unloaded and your account settled before they get here, you can be on your merry way and we can just claim we made a mistake in the paperwork. We'll let you keep half of what it is they would have collected from your pre-wharf inventory, of course, we would keep the other half. Really, it's a pretty good bargain for you, because you get to leave here with SOMETHING in your cargo hold."

"Yes, about ten percent of what I arrived here with," the captain thought to himself, afraid to say anything else out loud, lest he give that away, too.

And so the ship came alongside the wharf, was docked, and everyone went about their business with a professional courtesy that did not go unnoticed by the captain. The wharf parking attendant was as good as his word. He had managed to forestall the coast guard inspection, had the ship unloaded and re-supplied in one day, and the merchant ship was on its way before the sun went down. She sailed back towards the South into the Dardanelles, first, then to the west, Istanbul just a shrinking view off her stern, and now a memory, though

the smell of her lingered in the winds coming from astern.



Lake Tahoe was not unlike this, either. Not a large city, but a large TOURIST area, it costs money to STOP in Lake Tahoe. Not knowing any better, and knowing that it was tourist season (there is no OFF season at Lake Tahoe, since there's the lake in the summer, and skiing in the winter, and casinos and the sheer beauty of the lake year round.) I made hotel reservations at SOUTH LAKE TAHOE. Knowing what I know now, I would have gone to the North side of the lake, which is much

less developed, they say. South Lake Tahoe is the American Monte Carlo. Perhaps it is America's St. Moritz in the winter. It is expensive. It is trendy. It is the playground of the fabulously wealthy. It is full of tanned middle-aged bodies and faces that have had thousands of dollars of cosmetic surgery done. It is a place where older men are seen with trophy women on their arms. The ostentatious richness there borders on gauche.

I have seen several modern Bentley cars, but the cumulative total of the Bentleys I have seen heretofore was exceeded by ONE afternoon's drive around South Lake Tahoe. Someone's got too much money. I hope all those Bentley owners were people who created wealth where none had previously existed rather than those who merely transferred wealth from other places to their own accounts (Ayn Rand called them LOOTERS!). I hope they EARNED their money. If I wanted a Bentley, I suppose I could find a way to own one, but I swear a Chevrolet suits me just fine, even if the government owns Chevrolet now, which makes them less attractive to me. I wish the government was out of the car business, the energy business, the insurance business, the news and broadcasting business, the health-care business, the mortgage business, the banking business, the education business, and MY business. I wish the government was serious about the immigration and border-protection business, the business of development and application of a strategic and tactical foreign policy that extends beyond 4 years, the business of fiscal propriety, the business of bipartisan dedication to and preservation of our constitutional rights, and the business of avoiding conflicts of interest and keeping its nose clean. I wish politicians were about the business of their constituents other than about the business of their own reelection.

Where is all this coming from? How did I stray from Lake Tahoe to government excess? I suppose I warned you at the beginning. "Not the Same" was the topic. I am definitely not the same. I hope the change is good. Sometimes I fear that I am losing my mind; but those are fleeting fears. Having never lost my mind (Though I have lost my temper many, many times, and I have given so many pieces of my mind, there may be very little left), I do not quite know how to identify it. If confusion is a symptom of losing one's mind, then the opposite is happening; I'm GAINING my mind. I do not have confusion, I have this remarkable CLARITY happening. I can see right past the confusion that obfuscates things on the surface, and peer right in to the root. While this may be beneficial in the long run, it can be quite worrisome as clarity is cluttering one's mind.

From the first reading of Mark Twain's Roughing It, and his fabulous description of it, I have dreamed of Lake Tahoe. I have fantasized about Lake Tahoe. I have smiled when I heard her name mentioned. On my trip, as I sat on a bench, watching the sun go down behind her western mountain shore, I just sat there with tears streaming down my face, the first and foremost item on my bucket list realized. I was overwhelmed.

"What's wrong with you, Dad?" Canaan asked me.

I shook my head and just barely managed to blurt out, "Nothing, but I can't talk right now."

I got up, walked through the beach's large grained sand, a surprising thing and slightly uncomfortable on bare feet, and waded in her cool waters, the lake waves lapping at my ankles, and the sun dropping ever lower, and lower, and lower, so slowly that I seemed to sense the earth turning from underneath the sun rather than perceive the sun as going down, until the lake's mountains were backlit in a glowing crimson sky, reminding me of the old saying:

*Red sky at night, Sailor's delight
Red sky at dawning, Sailor's take warning.*

The redness of the sky indicating that every available bit of moisture had been sucked up into the atmosphere by the constantly glaring sun, but not so much as a wisp of cloud in sight; no rain tonight, no rain tomorrow, hardly any rain, ever. And I strolled along her beach weeping uncontrollably, filled with an unspeakable joy as the Lord had prepared this vision, in this place for me. I was overwhelmed with His nearness. I was immersed in glory. The very instant the sun dropped behind the mountains, its rays became gloriously apparent, and it made me want to cheer out loud.



I did not have to, as I was startled by the cheering of the formerly oblivious people around me. There were hundreds of them. I had not seen them, so caught up was I in this vision. It seems that people go every day to just watch the sun drop behind the same mountains. I can see why this is a tradition at Lake Tahoe. I did not know about this.

I was so fortunate to be caught up in this very real tradition at Lake Tahoe without knowing it existed. I wonder what the formerly oblivious people thought about this weeping, talking-to-himself man wading in the water? Maybe I was as invisible to them as they were to me. I think so. Like them, I was there without really being there. I was in heaven. Maybe they were fortunate enough to be in heaven, too. When my consciousness returned, I was still in heaven. Weeks later, the power of that religious experience still upon me, I still am.

In *ROUGHING IT*, Mark Twain said the following two things which (among others) captures the essence of Lake Tahoe, now that I have seen it:

Three months of camp life at Lake Tahoe would restore an Egyptian mummy to his pristine vigor and give him an appetite like an alligator. The air is very pure and fine, bracing and delicious, the same as angels breathe

As the lake burst upon us - - a noble sheet of blue water lifted six thousand feet above the level of the sea, and walled in by a rim of snow-clad mountain peaks that towered aloft three thousand feet higher still! As it lay there with the shadows of the mountains brilliantly photographed upon its surface, I thought it must surely be the fairest picture the whole earth affords.

When I read *ROUGHING IT* for the first time as an early teen, those words hooked me. I was smitten with Lake Tahoe through this description and remained so until I finally saw it. Having seen it, I was not disappointed. The lake was superior to her superlative description.

I'm glad I did not share one of Twain's experiences, though. He managed to start a serious forest fire while he was there, initiated by an unattended campfire. He and his companion were forced to take to their boat to get away, watching a huge section of forest be reduced to ashes by their carelessness as they rowed back to their main camp, since in the process, they managed to burn up all their provisions. The forest is DRY there. This cool oasis is in the midst of high-altitude desert, though its alpine nature belies that fact.

After the sundown experience, Canaan and I went back to our hotel, then wandered around the tourist shopping area a bit, then sought out a place to dine. After that, we retired for the

evening, but I was up early – way before daylight, and walked down to the lake in the darkness so I could watch the sun come up as I set on her shore. Watching the sun come up when one is facing the west is not nearly so dramatic, but I had the view to myself. I think the number of people NOT there in the pre-dawn coolness to witness the sunrise far exceeded the number that had been there the previous evening. I enjoyed my time alone. I stayed there until it was well daylight, until I became thoroughly chilled. It was time to go back and wake Canaan up and continue our journey. He complimented the wisdom of my choice to witness the sunrise alone rather than waking him so he could experience it with me. He said so several times later during the day.

As we were packing the car, I couldn't help but notice the Bentley parked next to my wife's Murano, which she had so graciously allowed us to take on our trip (She likes her car and really didn't like the idea of using my pickup truck for a month.) Canaan was peering at himself in the depths of the black, highly polished paint on the Bentley's fender.

"Nice!" he said.

"\$300,000 worth of nice," I replied. "Don't you dare touch it."

"Just looking," he said.

"The person who owns that car probably doesn't want you so much looking at it," I surmised.

"Well, he shouldn't have parked it next to our car in this parking lot," he said. "Besides, the guy who owns this wants people to admire it, seeing that he has it on display. I'm enjoying looking, and he is probably in his room having sweet dreams about me out here admiring his ride."

He had a point. I'd like to have a Bentley, too, except I'd like to have one like my friend Wayne's: a 1954 R Type. An old one is cool. A new one is much less than that. Gauche keeps coming to mind.

I had punched in the address of our next stop that evening into the Tom-Tom. We had reservations in Oakhurst, California, which is near the South entrance of Yosemite. I kept forcing the Tom-Tom to calculate alternative route until such time as I had a continuous map of squiggly roads with switchbacks, indicating a nice mountain drive. We only had 120 miles to go via that route, and all day to do it. A nice, slow drive on a beautiful day would be just the thing to help me ruminate on my Lake Tahoe experience. That was a nice thought, but as it turned out, there was no time for that, as each bend, each switchback, and around each corner brought more glory into view. What a day we would have! I have seen lots of beautiful places, but the High Sierras have no peer.

There are two passes through the mountains near Lake Tahoe. One is the infamous Donner Pass, through which I wanted to go. If you are not familiar with Donner Pass and the events which surround the Donner Party, who gave the pass its name, then shame on you at your ignorance of American history. Google this and find out about it yourself. I'm not going to tell you.

As it turns out, our route would take us through the glorious Tioga Pass, avoiding the infamous Donner. That means I have yet to see Donner. Even having not seen it, I can confirm that Tioga is an acceptable substitute. We drove through the most gorgeous countryside. Though we had spent the night in California, just two South Lake Tahoe blocks from the Nevada state line, we would back up in Nevada for the early part of our drive. As we approached the California state line from the highway, we saw a sign and an inspection station that required all vehicles to stop for inspection. I knew what this was all about, but Canaan was puzzled. I didn't say anything.

As we pulled into the inspection station, I was motioned ahead by the lady inspector. I pulled along side and stopped when she indicated.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

"Mississippi," I replied.

"Really??" she asked, somewhat astonished.

"Yes, ma-am," I said to her smiling face.

She peered into the car and saw that it was absolutely full of stuff.

"What brings you to California?" she asked.

"A music festival near Auberry," I replied.

"Got an ice chest in there?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Whatcha got in it?" she asked.

"Some baloney, ham, and other luncheon meats, and condiments," I replied.

"Mind if I have a look in it?" she asked, politely.

I got out, opened the hatch, shifted some stuff around, and pulled the ice chest out and opened her up. She focused her eyes intently and peered into the ice chest.

"Looking for produce?" I asked.

She looked up startled. "How did you know that? Been to California before?"

"Everybody knows that California is the nation's fruit and produce capital, and the sovereign state of California does not want me bringing in fruit flies or other agricultural pests in any unprocessed fruits or vegetables I have in my possession which could wreak havoc on the multi-billion dollar California produce industry," I said.

Finding nothing in the ice chest, she flipped the lid down and smiled. "Most people who pass through the first time have no clue about what we are looking for in our inspection."

"I would not have even entertained the idea of smuggling some contraband broccoli into California."

She laughed, handed me a road map, and simply beamed with a smile when she said, "Enjoy your trip to California," and then we were off.

If we had had a livestock trailer with some horses or cattle, I'm sure that there would have been a more serious inspection. No doubt having to show papers on them, or having them quarantined until such time as a certified California veterinarian could declare them healthy. I don't know what might happen if one tried to cross the California border with an undocumented house cat or Pomeranian. One might have one's pet sequestered. I'm sure that California, in its vigilance to keep out undocumented produce and animals has an even better plan to keep out undocumented people from crossing her border, particularly the one between California and Mexico, or do they still just examine people for contraband produce? Perhaps they rely on the Federal government to keep out undocumented people.

We felt official after our inspection. We had been officially inspected by representatives of the State government, and not found lacking, were officially welcomed to the state, presented with a gift (the road map) by the gracious people of the State of California, and presented with the instructions to enjoy our time there. I'm just glad we weren't traveling with any undocumented

dogs, cats, cauliflower, or children, or Mexican migrants with contraband cilantro leaves secreted away on their persons in some inconspicuous place.

I later explained to Canaan in detail what that was all about when we stopped just a few miles down the road for a nice breakfast at a roadside diner. I told him that perhaps on our way back home (as I was sure we would), that we'd get a glimpse of the intensive agriculture in the San Joachin Valley. He lost interest at that point, choosing to focus on the country fried steak and eggs the waitress had just placed in front of him. Me, too.

As we meandered through mountain roads, gaining and gaining in elevation, we were overtaken with the beauty of the sierras. We "ooohed" and "ahhhed," gawked, strained our necks to see what was around each bend before we actually got there, drove far more slowly than the clear mountain roads required, got the special wave by more than one friendly Californian as they went around this impediment to their travels, and pulled over countless times to get out and enjoy the scenery. Around one bend, we came face to face with the North entrance of Yosemite National Park. There was no where else to go but through it, as we were on the only road for miles that we to our destination. We could go back or go forward, but we couldn't stay where we were. This altered my plans, not that I minded having my plans altered. Sometimes plans must be altered when we are overtaken by unintended consequences. Sometimes our altered plans, themselves, yield unintended consequences. Sometimes our pejorative ideas of the word consequence leads us to an error in thinking. For the first time since we left on our trip, Calvin makes himself known. I was not aware that he had gone with us, so quiet had he been.

"So, now you are faced with a change in your plans. You must either go back, or on to Yosemite today instead of TOMORROW," he whispered.

"So?" I asked him.

Canaan whipped his head over to me and asked, "So, WHAT?"

"Nothing," I said back to Canaan, "Just responding to something an old friend asked."

"Sometimes you worry me, Dad," Canaan said.

I shrugged my shoulders. "Canaan, I had planned for us to go to Yosemite tomorrow, but it looks like we are forced to go through it today, which will leave us with a free day tomorrow."

"That's fine," he said.

So we paid our money at the gate, me mentioning that I could hardly believe how few people were there at this most magnificent of National Parks during what surely must be the height of the tourist season, enjoying the idea of seeing it unencumbered by all those tourists, and we three, Canaan, Calvin, and me, drove through the gate into the unspoiled, quiet beauty of Yosemite. Amid the wonders I would soon see with my own eyes, I would soon learn just how wrong I was. We had seen all the solitude we were going to see for the next several hours.

Like everyone else, I wanted to get to the view of El Capitan, Half-Dome, and Bridal Veil falls. We weren't actually hurrying to get there, but I'll admit that I was not HERE and NOW as we drove through the park. I was still somewhat taken aback at the lack of others in the park. I was going to enjoy this. We rounded bend after bend, drove on switchbacks as we went up in elevation, and drove on more switchbacks as we went back down. The scenery was beautiful. Finally, after about 30 miles, we rounded one bend, and there, in one vista, was the subject of so many Ansel Adams photographs. There was the vista I had been looking for. It is a view that makes one's jaw drop, one's eye gets glassy, and one tends to drool a bit as one is taking in what so many have seen as Earth's most beautiful vista. There as no place to pull over, but

a sign said "Scenic Overlook ½ Mile." Waiting on that overlook was better than driving off the road since one was not able to keep one's eyes on it, but rather the breathtaking view.

The road we were on merged into another road, which seemed to have much more traffic, but we found the scenic overlook and turned in. There was not a place to park. There were HUNDREDS of cars, dozens and dozens of buses, and legions of motor homes. There were at least 500 motorcycles. There were thousands of people. A few of us were Americans, and a few were English speaking Australians, but the majority seemed to be Japanese tourists. If there was one, there was ten thousand. I finally found a place to park after driving several rounds around the parking lot. I knew something was wrong about my perceptions of the small number of people here. I knew there had to be more, but I had become persuaded at my own false reasoning. What I had seen earlier, the lack of people is due to the fact that from the North, one approaches Yosemite from a vast desolate, alpine wilderness. The bulk of Yosemite's visitors come in from the East and the South. Now, we were right in the middle of a hub where the visitors who come from different areas converge to enter the Yosemite Valley. It was as crowded as a box office window at a theatre that was selling tickets for ELVIS.

Though it was absolutely lousy with people, we were all there for the same reason, and there it was right before my very eyes. No photograph can prepare you for what it is that you are seeing. The vastness and the scale, and the sheer natural beauty of Yosemite cannot be properly conveyed in a photograph. It can be simulated in an IMAX theatre, but that is only a simulation. It is not the real thing. There, the actual light from this vision falling on my own retinas, was El Capitan, Half-Dome, and Bridal Veil Falls. I was overwhelmed, since I was unprepared; but I was not alone. No one can possibly be prepared.

We were pressed into service by polite Japanese tourists to take their photos. And I pressed them into service after setting up my camera to get the full depth of field, and Canaan and I had our photo taken together with this vista in the backdrop. We looked at it for a few minutes and began to debate going down into the valley. We breathed in the view for a few more minutes and decided not to brave the other tourists, and to head on South to Oakhurst.

Now President Obama and his American Reinvestment and Recovery Act had decided that the road from the Southern entrance to the park and the Valley, being the principal entrance, was to receive monies for improvement, and the road was in the midst of this improvement. Here you have a narrow, tow-land, extremely curvy mountain road being repaved. We were there at such a time as all the traffic devices and flagmen were in place to direct people to the NORTH. It was not the time to be heading SOUTH on this road. Car after car was pouring in headed from the South into the valley, and every vehicle was turning out of the parking lot also headed North as the flagmen would let them turn out into the oncoming traffic. Everyone was headed further NORTH. Everyone but us, that is. Out of thousands and thousands of people, we were the only ones that wanted to go South at this time. They were not prepared for us. It took nearly an hour to get out of the parking lot. Once we got to the road, we were blocking traffic all kind of ways, since we wanted to go South. The flagmen had no choice but to let us go on out, but once we got on the road, it was still no easy going.

It took three hours to go the 30 miles to Oakhurst. Since they were repaving a two lane road, only one lane would be open for miles and miles. Then the other lane would be open, but still, all the signage and efforts of those who were directing traffic were primarily in place for those vehicles that were headed North. We caused them lots of problems, since we were the ONLY folks going South. It was a wicked, wretched drive South to Oakhurst amid the chaos of construction, and the wave after wave of endless streams of vehicles headed in the opposite direction. It was so bad, after we had finally cleared the park, we decided that we had seen enough of Yosemite. While the miserable drive to get out of Yosemite made us decide that we

did not want to go back, it did not in the least diminish the spectacular view we had witnessed while we were there. Was it worth all the trouble to get a glimpse of it? Absolutely. Having had the glimpse, would I want to brave the inconvenience to see it again? Nope. The glimpse is still with me. So is the memory of the difficulties of dealing with Yosemite's mountain roads while they are under reconstruction. We checked into our hotel room at Oakhurst, passed a nice evening, and pondered what we would do the next day.

Looking at the nice map the lady at the California inspection station has give us, I could see that it was only a few miles to Kings Canyon National Park, which is the home of the Giant Sequoias, and that was definitely something I wanted to see. But the memory of our experience in a major National Park during the height of the tourist season made me think twice. Pondering over the map, I looked and happened to see a mention of NELDER GROVE, which was only six miles from where we were, situated on National Forest Service land. Just below the name Nelder Grove was the legend "Giant Sequoias."

After breakfast, we took off to Nelder Grove. There was hardly anyone there. While the giant sequoias in Nelder Grove were not quite as large as those in the National Park, they were large enough for this Mississippi boy. Canaan and I walked reverently around in the forest, as these trees seem to demand your silence, though apparently not all persons get this same reverent feeling.

At one short trail, which looked promising, there was just one other car, a mini-van. This mini-van included four adults, one toddler, one child in a stroller, and two very large Dalmations. Those folks made more noise than any group of five that I have ever seen, and why someone would travel with their dogs is a mystery to me. I think the obnoxiousness of the dogs was magnified by the demand of the surroundings for silence. I am fond of dogs. I am partial to dogs. I love my own two dogs. Would I travel on vacation with them? Not a chance. We can wait and be glad to see each other when I return home. They'll be glad to see me, and I'll be glad to see them, and I will not have inflicted them on anyone else. It will all work out better that way.

Those poorly behaved Dalmations were everywhere at once. Apparently the father had been charged with maintaining the Dalmations, but he had either lost his grip on the leashes, or decided to let them run free, seeing that there was no one else around but Canaan and me. Here they came, running straight at us, sniffing, barking, yelping, slobbering, and jumping up on us. This is not "cute" to me. When you come to my house, my dogs will bark at you, as they should, since you are a stranger to them and have invaded their territory. They will growl and bark with their hackles up, and raise nine different sorts of hell at you - - that is their job. Then the younger of the two dogs will come up and give you a sniff then be pleased to make your acquaintance. The elder will continue to stand back and glare at you with a watchful eye to see what kind of meanness you may have up your sleeve and would not dare come within personal distance of you. She is very protective about her personal space.

But neither would dare to jump up on you, put their dog paws in the middle of your chest and flail away with their large dog tongues trying to lick your face. They have more respect for your personal space than that. I have trained them to be so. Sometimes I have to correct my friends who coax my dogs into jumping up and putting their paws on them. My friends always say that they don't mind, to which I always say, "But, I do!" A dog admires consistancy in its owner. A dog does not mind obeying the rules if it can determine what the rules are. If obeying the rules makes you happy, then your dog should be happy doing it. A dog enjoys being a dog. A dog does not mind that I am in charge, if I will actually BE in charge. A dog is a dog. A dog is not a person. My dogs are not people. Your dogs are not people. I will respect your dog because it is a good dog, or perhaps because I respect you, but any person far

outranks a dog in the amount of respect due to them. One of the things that perplexes me is when I see people who allow their dogs to control them, and in the midst of their confusion, they try to use language to rationalize with their dogs.

"Now, FiFi," the dismayed owner of the well-coiffed toy poodle says as she kneels down to explain to the dogs how feeling were hurt by FiFi's behavior, "Why would you want to do something so disgusting as to eat the Chihuahua feces that bad person let their dog leave on the grass without cleaning up after them when you know we have good tasty doggie treats for you?"

FiFi says nothing, but squirms and wiggles as her owner picks her up, bring FiFi to her face, and allowing FiFi, with the smell of Chihuahua feces still on her breath, to lick her all about the face. FiFi is doing this offensive thing, hopefully, so that her owner will put her back down so she can dash off to find some more of those Chihuahua treats she finds so interesting. The owner thinks FiFi is being sweet. FiFi is just thinking about Chihuahua crap, wanting to get back to it.

"Isn't she sweet?" the owner asks me as FiFi puts her Toy Poodle tongue all over her face, efvén licking her in the mouth a time or two. I shudder.

"Oh, you bet!" I force myself to say, thinking to myself, but not uttering, "Every bit as sweet as Chihuahua shit!"

Canaan and I found another trail to go down, getting ourselves away from this loud, obnoxious bunch, where we hiked among the Sequoias in peaceful solitude. Then we packed up, found a very narrow, rocky mountain road that would carry us over the mountains, where we came out on the eastern slopes, and then to the environs of Mount Whitney, the tallest peak in the 48 states. Only in California do you find such extremes. Within just a couple of hundred miles, you will find the tallest peak in the country (excluding Alaska) and the lowest place in North America, Death Valley. We also say Mono Lake, which Mark Twain explained was the near diametrical opposite



of Lake Tahoe in beauty. I was glad to see it, and Twain was not completely wrong in his description of this salt and mineral laden, rather decrepit looking large body of water, which only has inlets, and no outlet other than evaporation. Nothing lives there but some tiny brine shrimp exclusive to Mono Lake, and the birds that feed on them. When you have a lake into which water enters, carrying with it dissolved minerals, but no exit other than by evaporation, you get a Mono Lake, or a Great Salt Lake, or a Dead Sea, or for more California extremes, a Salton Sea. These are not inviting places, but they are all certainly worth seeing, if for no reasons than for a person to understand what DESOLATION actually looks like.

We also made a dry run to the music festival area, so that we would know how to find it early the next morning. Other than that, we ambled about with no particular purpose. I might mention here that we stumbled accidentally onto Bass Lake, which was as pretty as Mono Lake was ugly. It was a recreational lake, full of water skiers, swimmers, campsites all around, and family activities. Everything seem to be put to full usage there, and there were lots of smiling faces all about as we drove around her shores.

I have already described the magic of the music festival we attended. It is a private event, and the people thereof are very protective about its privacy. I will mention no more about it here, other than it is so magical that I am still under its spell these months later.

In the meantime, I have seen Hemosapien and my blood work looks good, I have an appointment at the end of October with Gooday at the Big-as-Texas Cancer Center for my six month checkup. All the folks in Hemosapien's office mentioned that they had enjoyed taking the trip with Canaan and me through my near daily postings about our progress. I was pleased to have had so many well behaved persons traveling with me. Not a one of them brought their dogs along.

10/23/10 Where is the TRUTH?

I think it's hiding somewhere, and not wanting to be found by those who would appropriate and twist it for their own purposes. The absolute truth is hidden from us. We only have the truth as we see it, and it is only an honest truth if we do not defile it by distorting it to suit our purposes.



Here's how I see it: Anyone who does NOT think that the news reporting on National Public Radio has a decidedly left-leaning slant leans pretty far to the left themselves. I have listened to "Morning Edition" and "All Things Considered" since the early 80's. I have listened to these shows, and filtered what they offered through my own conservative brain. I have seldom, very seldom, heard any news analysis that I thought was even on the moderate side coming from NPR. That is my honest opinion. I will stand by it. My opinion is a reasonable one for a conservative to have. Others, no doubt, have a different opinion about the political leanings of NPR, and

may even think that NPR represents journalism at its purest form, since there is no profit motive involved, only the quest for the truth. If one were to think that, I don't mind. I might disagree with the accuracy of what one thinks, but I can't disagree with the actual thinking of it.

One's opinion is one's opinion. The only way our opinion can be wrong is when, in a moment of clarity and understanding, we have come face to face with the wrongness of it. Any reasonable person would modify their opinion at that point, because only an idiot or an automaton would continue to support an opinion his own rationality told him had no merit.

One's opinion may be based on incomplete or erroneous information, and I can disagree with that information. But what if one's opinion was, "I like chopped liver!" How can anyone ELSE disagree with that.

"I like chopped liver," said Bill, taking a big bite out of his chopped liver sandwich.

"No you don't," I said back.

"Yes, I do," replied Bill.

"Well, I don't like it," I said.

"What's that got to do with ME liking it?" Bill asked me, chewing away.

"It's no good, bad for you, full of cholesterol, and tastes like silly putty mixed with sawdust soaked with buzzard droppings," I said, very matter-of-factly, crossing my arms, planting my feet firmly, and poking my chest out.

"It may or may not be bad for me, but it certainly tastes good to me, and regardless of what you think, I LIKE it," said Bill, getting a little steamed.

"Well, you're a tasteless idiot," I declare.

"I am not," Bill shouted.

"That is my opinion!" I cried.



"I'm a tasteless idiot because I like CHOPPED LIVER?" Bill shouted back at me.

"No, I thought you were a tasteless idiot before you pulled out that wretched chopped liver sandwich, I'm just now getting around to saying so."

Then a fistfight breaks out, me taking Bill's sandwich away from him and whipping him about the head and shoulders with it, and Bill poking me in the left eye while simultaneously kicking me in the shin. I curse and call him names. He curses back, pokes me in the eye again, and leaves me wearing what's left of his sandwich as a hat as he storms off to call his attorney. A stinking, dripping covering of chopped liver now defiles my person. I do not like what I am now wearing.

It is silly to think that two men would get into a fight because one likes chopped liver and one doesn't. I think Dr. Seuss covered this idea in the Butter Battle Book, though disagreements over some opinions, particularly opinions people hold that they attempt to force on others may not seem so silly. I cannot force Bill to not like chopped liver. Why would I try?

I also cannot force one who thinks that NPR's journalistic tradition is pure and unspotted to change his opinion. I am willing to let them hold that opinion if it satisfies them. I cannot, however, relinquish mine, when the evidence I hear, coming in through my own ears and being processed in my own brain, tells me that there is a certain political leaning to what I am hearing.

I know the difference between news analysis and editorials, and perhaps the invention of 24 hour news channels has meant that we get too much news analysis and editorializing, so much so that some people are no longer able to tell the difference. When you run a 24- hour news channel, you have to fill the time with something, even on a slow news day. If it is a slow news day, what do you say?

"Today, there is no news!" Shepard Smith might say, and the screen shows nothing but 2-minute cleaning product and kitchen gadget commercials for the next 23 hours and 59 seconds. Perhaps there is a high speed car chase going on somewhere where there is a video camera trained on it, and we are forced to see local real-time melodrama on a national broadcast, something which should only be written up on page 25 of the newspaper, buried somewhere near the classified ads and legal announcements.

The no news thing won't work. So, to fix it, we have CNN, MSNBC, FOX, and all the others giving us endless analysis and punditry of the things that occurred, and also of the non-events that happened. Seamless coverage of a non-event is insipid. I admit that I have watched this as opposed to reruns of the ANDY GRIFFITH SHOW. I would have been better off seeing Andy disciplining Opie for stealing one of Aunt Bea's pies than to watch a non-event news item.

What's all this got to do with NPR? Just this.

Over the last nearly 30 years, I will have to admit that some of the things I have heard on NPR have mitigated my conservatism, perhaps made me a little more liberal. Some of the things I have heard on NPR have certainly made me aware of what liberals are thinking, even when I vehemently disagreed analysis of the news that was presented, or even moreso, the analysis I was hearing that was presented to me as the raw news. This did not injure me in any way. It is what civil dialog and discourse are all about.

I like Fox news. Is Fox fair and balanced as they portray themselves? Sometimes they certainly are. Mostly? I don't think so, but I don't mind this either. Here is news presented to me from a conservative viewpoint. I hear my own voice on a national forum. I LIKE this, and so do millions of other conservatives. Do conservatives get too hear their voice on network

news, or other cable news channels? If one is a conservative and one can hear it, their ears are better than mine.

Shows like Bill O'Reilly, Chris Matthews, Rachael Maddow are not news. They DEAL with items in the news, and they present fact and figures, but their are shows built around specific ideals, the personalities and leanings of their hosts and producers, and are meant primarily to entertain. They are commentary. That does not mean that the hosts of these shoes do not present the news, contain the news, contain facts and truths that are relevant to the news, and explore newsworthy items in depth, but their primary goal is to entertain. No one would watch them if they were not entertaining. Rush Limbaugh always maintained that the purpose of his show was to entertain and that when he ceased to entertain people he would be failing in his duty as host. I don't know if he still says that since I have not listened to Rush in a long, long time, but when I first discovered him, in about 1988, here was MY voice. Here was someone in the media saying what I thought. I knew it wasn't news. I knew it was opinion and analysis, but I still liked it, though this was not nearly the only place where I got my information. People don't read enough anymore, and what they do read are now tweets and facebook postings. Even our READING material has taken on the form of the sound byte. What a shame.

Now I get to my main point.

Juan Williams has been a clear, reasonable voice of liberalism on Fox. Juan is liberal, but he does not seem to come too far from the left, and what far-left liberals seem to dislike the worst are liberals who aren't liberal enough. Juan is articulate, thoughtful, and well spoken. Juan has been an INFLUENCE on me, and on the entire rhetoric of those Fox news shows in which he participates.

Perhaps Juan was not liberal enough for NPR. Perhaps NPR has taken so much money from foundations controlled by George Soros that they answer to George Soros. Everyone answers to someone. A great songwriter once wrote in a great song, "You've got to serve somebody." The idea that since there is no profit motive at NPR and they are free from licking the boots of corporate advertisers is an idea that has no merit, advanced only by those who are naive or duplicitous. They have to serve someone, and their big donors have a voice in their programming. You can hear them admit it in the credits.



"National Public Radio receives funding in part by the X foundation for reporting on issues involving XXXX around the world," says the NPR announcer at the beginning and end of the broadcast. Rest assured, the reports broadcast on the issues of XXXX line up with the slant on things that the X foundation thinks is prudent. It may even be that the XXXX issue is one that no one is interested in, but NPR must broadcast something favorable about it, else the funding from X foundation upon which they rely disappear like chaff tossed in the wind.

I have never heard the announcer say, "NPR receives a grant from X foundation to cover the issues surrounding XXXX in today's world, but NPR does not really think they are particularly relevant to this news broadcast, choose not to broadcast anything about this issue, but sincerely appreciates the grant just the same."

We must hear about XXXX. We must hear about it regularly (how regularly depends on the size of the grant) and what is written and broadcast about XXXX must be in accordance with what it is that X foundation hopes to accomplish concerning XXXX.



Again comes George Soros. His 1.8 million dollar grant to NPR to hire reporters to cover politics in state capitals means that there are new reporters covering issues at the state level who know where the funding for their jobs are coming from. These young reporters, fresh from journalism schools all over the country (1.8 million dollars will not hire 100 seasoned veteran journalists), will only report on issues that they think are those which George Soros will think is important. Some will be honest young reporters who will write articles based on the truth as they see it, but someone else, wanting to keep that funding coming in, will only air the articles that fit with the political ideas articulated by, or known to be held by, the contributor of the funds. The editors aren't stupid, and they can do this with some degree of journalistic integrity, since their bosses can override them. Who overrides Mr. Soros? Who tells him no? Will that be Vivian Schiller? Will that be NPR executive vice president Ellen Weiss? Money is seldom given without strings. Mr. Soros is an influential man. His indication of the importance of an issue will be shared by those who have their hands held out to receive the check.

Juan Williams is well on his way to becoming a news superstar, thanks to Vivian Schiller and George Soros. Vivian Schiller? She will probably fade into obscurity just as soon as she loses her job over the mishandling of Juan Williams. George Soros will not make up the shortfall of the cut in government funding and the drop-off in contributions. This lack of funding will precipitate a crisis at NPR that the board of directors will lay at the feet of Ms. Schiller. They will have no choice but to ask her for her resignation. The board of directors of NPR can be found at this link: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NPR>



It has been said that federal funding only amounts to 3.3 million dollars of NPR's 160 million dollar budget. But when cuts in donations and government funding to LOCAL public radio stations that actually carry NPR news happen, and those stations fail or can no longer afford to pay for the fees for the rights to broadcast NPR news, NPR will become more irrelevant than they already are. Goodbye and good luck to you, Ms. Schiller.

The government contribution to the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, of which National Public Radio is part, is far more significant. I think the next congress will dismantle this by refusing to fund it. We could possibly be seeing its demise. What a shame. At least Sesame Street can be picked up by any of several networks.

Maybe George Soros can just build his own media network, since it seems like he wants to own one, just like Rupert Murdoch did.

Leaving tomorrow for BATCC. I'm keeping my fingers crossed. I will report back to you

10/26/10 The Passing of Mrs. Grace

You knew her here as Mrs. Grace. Her real name was Cornelia May Eubanks. I will still call her Mrs. Grace. During my trip to BATCC back in August 2009, to begin my first round of chemo, Debbie and I met Mr. and Mrs. Grace and wrote about them at length. I got the following obituary from Mr. Grace via e-mail yesterday, while I was back at BATCC for my six month checkup. In just a couple of days, Mrs. Grace had made a tremendous impact on Debbie and me. I was in the midst of my first round of chemo, and she was in the midst of tests which later determined that there was nothing they could do at BATCC that could not be done for her at home, as she entered the terminal stage of her cancer. But oh! What life she exuded. She took it in with every breath, and breathed it upon all of us who were fortunate to be within her sphere of influence. Our lives will never be the same.

She and Mr. Grace spent sixty-one years together, and I suspect that nearly all of them were good years, though from her obituary, it seems that there were some hard, hard times along the way; but no doubt, during the hard times, they held fast to each other. I pray that Mr. Grace and his family are blessed with God's peace, which the scriptures assure us, is the peace which passes all understanding.

We are all the better for having known her, no matter how briefly. We are all diminished at her loss. Her obituary is reprinted here. She will long be remembered with great fondness.

In Loving Memory of...
Cornelia May Eubanks
Born on July 14, 1928 in Thomasville, Georgia
Departed on October 8, 2010 in Mitchell County, Georgia

Mrs. Cornelia May Eubanks passed away on October 8, 2010 at her home in Mitchell County, Georgia. Born on July 14, 1928, in Thomasville, Georgia, she is preceded in death by her parents, Carlie Denton May and Beulah Roberts May, her two infant brothers and a son, Joseph Lebron Eubanks. She is survived by her husband of sixty-one years, John Leonard Eubanks of Mitchell County, Georgia, a son, John Denton Eubanks of Boston, Massachusetts, and a son, James Keaton Eubanks and wife, Tina McDonald Eubanks of Mitchell County, Georgia. Other survivors include her sister, Louise May Pope of Lexington, Virginia, her niece, Debby Pope Beckley and her husband, Harlan of Lexington, Virginia, and her nephew James Pope and his wife Cathy of Downingtown, Pennsylvania. As a 1949 graduate of Huntington College in Montgomery, Alabama, she returned to Mitchell County and became a civic leader in her community, a long time member of the Pelham Garden Club, and was actively involved with children's educational activities in the Pelham schools. Music was her passion and from the age of 13, she participated in the music program of the Hand Memorial United Methodist Church and was a member of the choir.

Visitation will be held on Sunday, October 10, 2010 from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m. at Jamerson Funeral Home in Pelham, Georgia. Funeral services will be held at the Hand Memorial United Methodist Church in Pelham, Georgia on Monday, October 11, 2010 at 10:00 a.m. with Rev. Michael Finn and Rev. Keith Goodlett officiating. Interment will follow in Pinecrest Memory Gardens. The active pallbearers are Woody Eubanks, Charles Yates, John Skipper, Jimmy Brinkley, Lucius Adkins, Edward Pritchett, and John Avard. The honorary pallbearers are Suzanne Anderson, Duane Bentley, Betty Palmer, Walt Bernier, Elmer Conley, and Randall Cooper.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests that donations can be made to the music program fund at the Hand Memorial United Methodist Church located at 242 Hand Avenue, Pelham, Georgia

10/29/10 My Trip to BATCC

Debbie and I took off for on Sunday, 10/24/10, to Houston for my appointment at BATCC on Monday morning. We had a nice drive on a beautiful day. No traffic much. Beautiful fall weather, and just a pleasant drive and visit with each other.

I admit that I was apprehensive about my visit, since I have not been feeling well for the past three weeks. I have had stomach problems, running a slight fever, headaches, trouble sleeping, night sweats, joint pain, and extreme fatigue. I was more than a little worried.

On our arrival at the hotel, they informed us that they were upgrading our room to a suite. They put us all the way on the top floor, this time, facing the North, so we could see the entire campus of the medical center (which is magnificently large) and also the buildings of downtown Houston. Every other time, our room faced the South, and we got a nice view of the parking garage immediately adjacent to the hotel. We were very pleased.

There was a card from the hotel management on the desk, addressed to a Mr. Ernest. It was not sealed. I opened it up and it read.

Dear Mr. Earnest:

We have made every effort to accommodate you during your stay at the BATCC Hotel. Thank you for choosing us and we hope you have a pleasant stay. Please call on us if there is anything we can do to serve you.

The Hotel Management and Staff

Mr. Earnest must have been delayed and unable to claim his room, so they gave it to us. It was a delightful room. I hope Mr. Ernest did not encounter any serious difficulties which resulted in our good fortune. Our suite was very large and delightful. Thank you Mr. Ernest. Since the suite was in the hotel serving a CANCER center, I must assume Mr. Ernest is a patient, and an important one. Mr. Ernest, I hope the reason that you did not require your room is your continued improving health.

I was at the Fast-Track lab at 6:30 the next morning. I left Debbie asleep, she knew my appointment with Gooday was at 8:45. Well, after they drew my blood, it wasn't 30 minutes later that they were calling me in to see Gooday. I was greeted by the remarkable Advanced Practice Nurse, Ms. Alice Lynn, whom you have met here previously. Alice smiled her lovely smile; it is her natural one.

As she was examining me, Gooday came in. He was pleased with the results of my blood work (it does not take them long to get the bloodwork there! A world class lab just down the hall!) My white cells were back up to near normal, with a few indications that they would keep their eyes on. A bone marrow biopsy was not going to be necessary, which is always good to hear.

I then went over my list of complaints and worries with him and Alice. Alice listened intently. Gooday was rather more anxious to talk, but when he began, I listened to him. HE explained that it was a common occurrence that cancer patients devote themselves and channel so much of their energy into getting well, that when they are lucky enough to be in remission, they do not know how to channel that energy. This usually results in a negative channeling, resulting in too much worry about what the future may hold.

"Let ME worry about that," he said. "That's MY job."

He went on to explain that I was a candidate for a new drug that was designed to work with the immune system to MAINTAIN remission. This drug is called Remlivid. It is in the Thalodimide family. Women of childbearing age do not want to take this one, for sure! He was

going to talk to Hemosapien about it and they would make a decision in the next few weeks, and in the meantime, I was to get on with playing my music.

He also told me about new, promising treatments they were working on, feverishly, since they were so close to a breakthrough of finding curative strategies.

"And I'm not bullshitting you," he declared.

God bless him! I despise bullshit.

As I was leaving, something happened that has never happened before. The extremely competent and professional, though clinically distant Nurse Alice, who had LISTENED to me, and touched me with her competent hands, the hands of a healer, ran up to me in the hall and hugged me. She looked me right in the eyes.

"You are doing fine," she said. "We are going to take good care of you!" And then she smiled that big smile of hers, but it wasn't just a professional smile this time, Nurse Alice was smiling at ME. I couldn't help but smile back!

The amount of healing in that exchange was tremendous. Thank you Nurse Alice.