

Falling Up Stairs: A Way of Living

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Stuck as linear creatures, we proceed forward, upward, we feel, to some destination not fully of our choosing. So there is this figurative staircase that we ascend. We each have our own, of course, as each of us has our own voyage--to mix a metaphor. Although we all ascend alone on our own journey, still the similarities of our travels outweigh the differences. Within a given society the similarities are almost disheartening, as we have even our most heartfelt emotions and rituals parodied by our culture. Heartbreak, birth, marriage, death, all become the casual and commonplace fodder for sitcom authors and country-western singers. Yet our lives, our paths are so much more than these cliches, which we both experience in great detail and later observe with a distance--as though looking down on our lives from a small plane above our neighborhood--our emotional memory lacking the clarity of the present. The pains we feel, all felt before by others to one extent or another, are our own. Common or unique, our pains and joys, our triumphs and grievous fiascoes are ours alone. Each grief we are given—although minimized by a world, which reduces, compares and trivializes the small as well as the great—is ours and is the very thread and substance of why we are here at all.

I want to live my life with my joy and my sorrow characterized by Wagner and Shakespeare not McDonalds and Cotton commercials. We are less like sitcoms than we are like Macbeth or Ophelia. These characters resonate with some profound rage and sorrow that is not common no matter often expressed. The joy brought by the birth of a child, the jealousy of a love turning away is no small thing in the Richter scale of our souls. We feel more deeply than the trivial media of our lives reflect. Yet, still the similarities exist.

My life and Timothy McVeigh's and the Pope's are all quite similar. Born and raised by parents concerned about some strain of societal values and hoping that we will succeed with definitions of success provided by *the twentieth century* (the

enemy of thinking adults). Tim, John and I each have this and last century, and goal setting, and ambition, and varying levels of this *success and failure* on our plates, plus dozens if not thousands of other commonalities connecting us. Even if we throw out the extremes and compare our lives to those most like us, we may still be troubled by the sameness of our ups and downs.

There seems a response that embraces the sameness and still addresses the separateness. We are forced to experience those things that are culturally dictated; yet, each experience is singular and specific to our experience alone. Looking at it with a staircase simile in mind the landings might well include: requisite kindergarten trials of parental separation, and later first-love issues, and prom-night disappointment, and graduations-multiple, and then a raft of "adult" menu items such as marriage, divorce, birth, and the death of parents and of course our own aging and deterioration. (*It strikes me as I write this that with these common "features" listed, we would benefit by an owner's manual to the whole "life thing."*) If these tales seem common now it is because we have lived one version while seeing dozens more: we discovered the patterns and rhythms to these tales as we went through them.

Within our own social setting most of us were on similar paths as we averred to attend prom, made engagement ring choices and hedged on childbirth medication options. The fact that these choices are made by so many *right now* does not diminish their importance in our lives. We have some 36,500 days to *strut about on our life's stage* (if we are grossly optimistic). Within that very brief time we have a smaller set of truly memorable events that are often memorable only because we have labeled them as such. But I endorse this labeling system because it helps demarcate the landscape of chronology that we are forced to traverse. Not like this is all some great big Ibsen play with each of us fraught by personal ennui and great burden. If not a sullen tragedy, it remains a play of sorts through which we go forward half as *actor*, pretending as much as feeling, and half as *author*, deciding what clever, or not so clever line our sympathetic

character will utter. Each day our character proceeds up his or her flight a bit farther.

As we climb it is easy to decide that we will skip prom or graduation or engagement or weddings because they are all so predictable, all so passe. But here is where I disagree. One should not fall for the misconception that just because so many have passed this way before their experience is diminished at all. Truth is, each day that passes may be so much like the one before that it is easy to become a cynic, and then critique life rather than live it. To become the *Roger Ebert* of your own life may give you a certain objectivity, but you lose the experience of enjoying the film. We pack our life with the “common” and the “mundane” not by choice, but experience repeated most often or with the most predictability becomes, by its very definition, “common” and “mundane.” It is not the fault of life but of our denigrating these honest little words.

So often the perception of commonness is a deception of culture, time and place. The father who has awakened each evening, on the hour, to respond to a crying infant may well find this activity *average*, but that is a deception of time. We are so deceived by linearity that we believe those things that we feel frequently during the course of one month or year are themselves average. This is because we do not sample for our average over the span of our lives. If so then we would see the waking with an infant as a very rare time indeed, and one neither common nor mundane in the unfair sense. How often are you brought awake in the middle of the night to help with another's crisis and you HAVE the exact solution to their terror? Then there is the reward as you meet the need. This is a rare opportunity indeed.

When one is seventeen and sees their peers graduating from what seems the most benign and boring of institutions, and they are all doing the same thing with the same feigned excitement from their families in the same cheap gown, then it is understandable that they would write this ritual off as superficial fluff. This is a deception of time and culture. Because it is happening so widely, it seems

common when it is just the opposite: this is a red step. You come to it only once in your staircase and you stop and paint it red and celebrate because whether you do or not, it is with you for life.

The most predictable red steps are the very ones that we should observe the most, because we are taken by their conspicuousness. This is not the same as blowing horns on New Year's Eve. Celebrating New Year's Eve with abandon may be a nice personal ritual, but it becomes a bit like the Mad Hatter's "Happy Un-Birthday" as you are so involved with calling everything *special* that you overapply the concept till parsing *significant* from *typical* is impossible. Then you live in a world like Lake Wobegone where "all of the children are above average." But the rituals that our society endorses may well be a good starting place for recognizing places to take out a paint brush and say "this is a step that I will recall, so I am claiming it and making it mine."

Like all analogies, staying too long on the one simile makes it weaker by the illustration, yet I see another referent that does not stretch it too far, I hope. We climb stairs looking ahead a few steps or to the next landing making our plans and forming scenarios. Scenarios are critical to being human. These are the myriad of short fictions that we project just before us in what is referred to as our "mind's eye." The term "mind's eye" is no poetic figure, but a physical/psychological necessity. Our actual eyes do not capture light and play it into our cerebrum. They receive light frequency messages and this is interpreted by another part of our brain, which then may interpret this data collection. There is in our minds a small projection room it seems: a part that takes the information and plays it for the interpreter. This explains why it is we "see" so clearly in dreams. Our minds add aural data in the dream state, so we have some recorder/player of sorts for audio, but dreaming is still largely accepted as a visual activity as our inner VCR rewinds, edits and plays the pretty pictures.

All of that to make this small point: we can see where we were a moment ago, but we never "see" where we are. There is always a millisecond delay. It is this

physiological nuance that allows us to walk while not looking down, and drive while interpreting data from a hundred yards back, and even project in our minds what will be around the next precipitous corner having never seen it. But this psychological anomaly is more telling than just that peculiarity, we operate on this level most of the time. We predict what will happen from birth. Turn one way you get the nipple, turn the other you get the floor. *Cause and effect*: prediction and reward becomes the only lesson and we expend our only resource learning it. That resource is attention. Our attentions also exist in time and are also expended in that dimension; not so our in our thought lives, which are the product of that attention span.

We are wholly linear in *existence*. We only move one direction. If you buy the good remote-control cars you go all directions and at different speeds. We are not the good remote-control cars; we are the cheap kind. We only go one direction and only at one speed. If we hit the wall, we are stuck. We are not, however, linear in *imagination*. We go all ways and at many speeds. Which of us has not known an old person who spent their time living in the past? At the same time, we have also seen or been the person who spends all of their time dreaming about the future of *who it is we will marry*, or how much we will enjoy being "the boss" instead of the bossed. This is the facility that we enjoy as those who have an inner eye. We **do** look back on our past, and at our past dreams as a certain reality that can supercede what our internal projector is running right now.

Then there is the downside: stumbling over the step of today while thinking about where we have yet to be. We assume, because of the seeming regularity of the rise and tread of the staircase that they never change. We are masters of prediction and rightly so. Some of this is what is referred to as "wishful thinking." Yet, most of thought is wishful by nature: wishing for things to be, or for things not to be. Our little projectors generating fears and desires often unsolicited by our conscious will. We trip, and our senses kick in to alert our dreamy minds of what the linear world defines as reality.

This happens minute-by-minute to my three-year old. She falls and is bruised on shin and head several times a day as she continues to learn how to negotiate stairs, uneven flooring, table edges, and the rest of the bipedal obstacle course of reality. She has the bruises and scrapes to prove that one must look down at one's feet with some regularity. But still, we forget this most basic lesson.

When someone dies, this is an uneven step: something that we did not predict because of its uncommon nature. But no less common than birth, which seems almost rote: after all we were all born. Many anticipate this step and it is widely felt as prescribed. So much so that those who cannot have children greet the absence of this opportunity as a missed step. Divorce is not as common as marriage, but say half as common. While we anticipate marriage, we leave anticipating divorce to celebrities and lawyers. If one wins the lottery I understand it takes a short period of time before the influx of cash is seen as a given. When one falls in love or gets a big promotion it seems that this is what life has to offer and it is uncommon to not adapt in short order. Perhaps it is telling of the human spirit that elation is easily absorbed and seems like the natural thing. Each time I have, for one reason or another, been bumped up to first class while flying it takes about two minutes before I become accustomed to being served Champaign in actual glasses.

Grief is the opposite response. For most it comes with much more tearing and denial. We step and step expecting to be met with some success and some minimal setback, but when that which we have least allowed our minds to view or consider happens, we stumble to a stop. Linearity is unimpressed with our pains or even our surprise. Time continues to pass, but we have a hard time looking back up the staircase. We try to stop and visit the loss or distress to understand how it is we were so caught off guard. Not as if knowing fully that we were going to come to this step would have been helpful in any way. Perhaps those who lose loved ones after months of agonizing suffering have already grieved, but their step was not *when* these friends passed but *when they began to realize this was*

coming. Like Dickens' Miss Havisham, we cannot stop all of the clocks and bring time to a halt as penance for time's transgressions. We keep moving forward.

It seems to me that if we come to something that we cannot will to recede into the fog of our past (or disappear completely from the leaky box that is our mind) then it too is a red step of sorts. Perhaps we should find another way of painting this step too.

In the Old Testament the Israelites marked the point of a great battle with a stone marker and named the stone. It was a way of saying *this is where it happened*. They marked it with relevance and understood it is an "Ebenezer¹." Claiming the past on an actual landscape allowed them to demarcate time physically if not mentally. Perhaps the metaphor for claiming the spot of loss is closer to this. In the landscape of our lives we often mark moments with announcements and gravestones, and this is our way of staking claims like miners trying to hold our lives from the great indefinite rush of time. This is a ritual that allows us to apply significance even if we have finite control. Battle won or battle lost, this is where it happened.

There is a certain beauty to these rituals and markers. We erect them to say this happened and it is part of me. We celebrate victory, we should at least claim grief. For of the two we are more defined by our response to failure than victory. It is easy to be the winner and requires little of our soul. It is another thing entirely to meet with loss. How do we claim it without rolling in it? Where is the distinction between holding one's head up and denying the script that grief dictates? To steel oneself to loss and while still claiming it is the corollary to painting a step red or planting our stone and naming it. We fall up steps and look around shame facedly to see if our fall was seen. It was seen. Seen by our entire species: each of us takes turns in falling and leaping up the steps two at a time. *Falling up stairs* seems like a way one could go through life, but for the most part, I see it as a condition of expecting one thing while another happens. We claim our success.

¹ | Samuel 7:11

We should claim our loss. If all you are given at times is the pain of losing then claim that pain.

Remember too that loss is another deceiver. When we hurt it often seems that this too is the norm. It is not. Life is not defined only by loss. For most loss, truly profound loss, is far less common than the entire balance of our one-way existence, and as such is far more memorable than the now preferable *common and mundane* that we had anticipated. Our lives need not rest on boredom wishing for bliss and fearing loss. But as we face either of the extremes it seems that we should claim them as the declaration that we are alive. Instead of denying or ignoring all of the ceremonies and rituals (both public and personal) that are common to us now, we should sing loudly and dance wildly and celebrate and paint that step red. And too, rather than wallowing in or ignoring our surprise disappointments, perhaps it is a more healthy response to claim them and label them and feel them intensely as they are our own. This is the other thing that we are given, which reminds us that life is neither a sitcom nor a joke.

We feel and sense not like the casual references in popular culture. We feel and sense like the Kings and Queens in Elizabethan tragedy. Our joys and victories are on a scale with gleeful Puck and a returning Odysseus. We are capable of true rejoicing. And too, our pain is not diminished by the awareness that others have suffered. Pain is not our life, but it is part of our life and our pain is our own. We feel it and can claim it and raise an Ebenezer at some point. But still we go on. We are asked to accept and move forward: remembering that point that we fell up the stairs.