

## Spirited Accidents: An Autoethnography of Possibility

By: [Christopher N. Poulos](#)

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### **Abstract:**

Kierkegaard says, “A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation . . .” This understanding of spirit-as-self-in-relation, leads, inevitably, to concerns for personal fulfillment, dialogue, community, and social justice in our world. To engage spirit in our ethnographic practice is to engage the self in relation —with the world, with others, with the very frames and possibilities of our being. The accidental ethnographer, open to the driving pulse of spirited searching, may stumble into openings never anticipated. Following these openings may lead to transcendent experiences that bring new relational possibilities into view.

**Keywords:** Accidental ethnography, autoethnography, improvisation, spirit, transcendence

### **Article:**

#### *Openings*

Søren Kierkegaard (1980, philosopher): “A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a *relation*.”

Mircea Eliade (1957, religious historian): “To designate the act of manifestation of the sacred, we have proposed the term hierophany . . . *something sacred shows itself to us* . . .”

Rudolf Otto (1958, mystic): “the numinous . . . issues from the deepest foundation of . . . apprehension that the soul possesses.”

Gabriel Marcel (1960, existentialist): “. . . man is continuously transcending himself.”

Norman Maclean (1976, fly fisher and writer): “Agony and hilarity are both necessary for salvation.”

Walker Percy (1960, via Binx Bolling, protagonist of *The Moviegoer*): “And there I have lived ever since, solitary and in wonder, wondering day and night, never a moment without wonder . . . not for five minutes will I be distracted from the wonder.”

### **Spirit and Transcendence**

Since the beginning of human consciousness, the mystics among us have pointed to categories of transcendent experience, wherein we humans may find ourselves wrapped up in a moment in which something sacred, something mysterious, something numinous (i.e., the divine) is showing itself to us. This is the kind of experience some of us *seek*, and some of us just *stumble upon*. I have found myself betwixt and between these two poles. I seek, but, more often than not, I stumble into something unexpected, and there find the kind of moment I was seeking, though not exactly in the line I had expected. Either way, we may find ourselves engulfed in mystery and wonder, and thus called upon to act.

Like Walker Percy's fictional protagonist, Binx Bolling, I come to myself one day and discover that I am, once again, on a *search*. Something has happened. Mystery deepens around me, and I find myself, standing alone on my porch, filled with wonder. I am called to act.

The writer in me is wise enough to know that the dream I've just had offers a clue and that I must go quickly to my computer to write into its meaning. This is how many of my days begin, following hints and clues and innuendoes that hover around the edges of my consciousness, beckoning me across thresholds, calling me to walk head on into the liminal, pushing me to poke around and see what turns up.

Often what I follow is just a thin thread, like the thread of *this* story, the one that hovers on the threshold of my consciousness, threatening to retreat from view, perhaps forever, if I don't attend to it, now.

So I sit down and begin to write.

And, by God, I fall into a story.

Although I am a scholar of *communication*, and thus traffic mostly in *talk*—the reasons for that choice may become obvious momentarily—I want to explore here the accidental epiphanies that may only be available in *silence*.

At least, in the right *kinds* of silence . . .

### Side(ways) Paths

You see, I grew up in a family where the communication is sideways. I've sometimes called it: "My Big Fat Greek Wedding Goes Southern Gothic: The Prequel." My dad's family, Greek immigrants mixed with Deep South Alabama Irish, collided with my mom's family, Deep South Scots who mingled with raw acerbic Dutch and English Northerners from mid-state New York.

The Greek way was to get in your face and have it out. Like a wrestling match with no rules, communication was a *contest*, in which one party slams the other to the mat, and walks away, snickering triumphantly. But the Southern way is to pretend you don't notice, to not let anything get under your skin, to remain stoical at all costs, but at the same time to send veiled but pointed "messages" intended to *instruct*. This can be done with a mere look, or a small, sharp comment, or simply with a disapproving silence. It all made for a strange, convoluted mix of hint, innuendo, dark sidelong looks, shouting, whispers of secrets, half-stories, and never, ever, ever any direct, honest communication. But there were barbs in the air, flying around, looking for a purchase just under your skin.

As I said, everything is sideways. You are supposed to pick up on the hints, which are mostly about putting you in your place. If you don't, you are too thick for words and probably deserve a damn good whacking.

So it's probably no wonder that, as a young lad, I began seeking peace in solitude. I spent many hours of my childhood alone, wandering the thick forests of the low, rolling Southern country I grew up in. And finding it much easier to breathe, in solitude and silence, not so wary, not under siege.

As I said, in my family, there was silence to be sure. But *this* was the heavy, brooding silence of people licking wounds and considering revenge. It was the disapproving silence, laden with guilt, directed at a transgressor, especially the one who seemed unaware of his transgressions. It was the silence of dark resentment, of the sharp look, of the "you should have known better" variety. It was the silence imposed on the taboo world—the world of slights and trespasses, of insults and sharp painful jabs, even violence—perpetrated by family members upon other family members.

So there was a lot of silence in my family. But the place the family retreated to for spiritual enlargement was, oddly, almost never silent. We were Episcopalians—in fact, my father was an Episcopal priest. This is an intricately scripted and highly ritualized version of Christianity, with a lot of talking, praying, sermonizing, and singing involved. There are many beliefs participants are expected to hold, but the Episcopalians I grew up with stopped just short of talking about sin and guilt and rebirth and “being saved”—all that more dogmatic stuff that goes with more fundamentalist strains of Christian faith.

Of course, Episcopalians do believe in guilt and shame and not “measuring up,” but since they opted out of the Catholic confessional ritual, they are often simply neurotic about it all. Human emotion? Direct, honest communication? Ha! Episcopalians are “God’s frozen people.” Meanwhile, the church ritual was so stylized, so scripted, so full of words, that there was no room for contemplation. By the age of eight, I had the whole service memorized, word for word. But, by the age of ten, I had learned to seize those rare moments of contemplation. And I began to wonder . . .

“I believe I know how to say all the words,” I found myself thinking, “But I don’t know if I believe all the words I say. And, boy, do we say a lot of words!”

And anyway, I would much rather spend my spiritual time wandering out in the rich, lush forests that surrounded our home. What I found *out there*—in the forest—was a new kind of silence, a silence devoid of human pettiness, a silence that engulfs the world in its unfolding mysteries—a silence that welcomes contemplation, a silence from which I could gather strength to go back and right wrongs, or at least write stories.

There was a time, early in my life, when I determined that I would be better off without people, that one day I would just walk out the door and never return. I would journey to a far wilderness—probably in Canada or Alaska—and live off my wits and the bounty of nature. This was many years before the ill-fated journey of Chris McCandless, documented in the book (Krakauer, 1997) and film (Krakauer & Penn, 2007) *Into the Wild*. But *I* was no fool. I would not go unprepared. In fact, I began amassing a great deal of survival equipment, and knowledge. There was a time when I could recite to you all the edible plants and tubers and nuts and berries and so on that could be harvested in the forests of North America.

But one day, just as suddenly, I pitched that dream aside.

It came as a simple epiphany.

I noticed that, although I craved silence, I also craved *company*.

I needed the company of humans, just maybe not *these* humans.

So I moved to Colorado, though not exactly to the wilderness, to start over.

I wasn’t far from wilderness, though. I landed in the “Cloud City,” Leadville, a hardscrabble mining town that happens to be perched at 10,200 feet above sea level and at the very base of the two tallest mountains in the Rocky Mountain chain. And there I wandered widely, engulfed in a new kind of wonder.

At least it seemed so to my eyes, and to my heart.

And thus began the second phase of my search, in which I searched the high country of the wide West for the “mystery of being” (Marcel, 1960) that I so needed to come into contact with. I traveled far and wide across the great Western United States, seeking in remote places that sense of communion with Spirit that I had long sought.

And I was, for a time, largely successful.

At least, I was wrapped up in the wonder of it all.

There is something about a glacier-carved mountain landscape that draws me out beyond myself. If there is a place on earth that is what the Celtics call a “thin place”—a place where the sacred breaks into the everyday, and, for a moment at least, washes over the ordinary, and thus takes me to a place of “standing outside myself” (ecstasy), it is a little spot in the northern Rockies, near the Canadian border. Or, maybe it’s just outside Taos, New Mexico. Or . . .

I have always found solace, and the possibility to connect with Spirit, in the arms of nature.

I still do.

But now, many years after the beginning of my Western adventure, I find the same energy in other, smaller spaces I inhabit.

Some of them have surprised me.

Like how, six weeks after moving to North Carolina, 9/11 hit, and I soon found myself seeking something—though I wasn’t sure what—amid a local community of peace seekers, the Society of Friends, or Quakers.

Weekly, we gather to sit together, communally, in silence.

Silence . . .

I contemplate the meaning of silence, as I sit in a room with 200 other people, friends, who are also silent.

In silence, I find *possibility*.

And somewhere, resting peacefully in the deep contours of silence, there is a still, small voice.

And that voice, quietly and only occasionally breaking the silence, whispers a Great Secret.

That voice is the voice of conscience, literally of “knowing together.”

The Great Secret, as I suspected all along—that communal knowing called conscience—is that there is no ONE GREAT ANSWER. Despite all the dogma-manufacturing machines and the long human chase after the ULTIMATE REALITY, the ultimate, final Great Secret is, simply, that there is no end to the search.

There is only the search.

And in the search, we realize we are all—the earth and all its inhabitants—connected by threads of what Thich Nhat Hanh (1992) calls “interbeing.” For Kierkegaard, the self-in-relation was the self that falls transparently into that higher, larger, greater reality, which some call God, and others, like Paul Tillich (1952), call “the God beyond God”—the God that transcends creed and dogma and prescription, the Spirit-God that engulfs us in wonder as we make our way about this wide, beautiful world. This is the Spirit-God that takes us into care, compassion, and the joy of connection. This is the Spirit-God that allows for awe. This is the Spirit-God that defeats despair. This is the Spirit-God that cries out for social justice. This is the Spirit-God that wants all children to eat and play and love and create.

This is the Spirit-God of dialogue.

And art.

And music.

And performance.

And ethnography.

And yet, we don't really *find* that Spirit-God, so much as experience its possibility.

*Seeking* spirit is really the *only* way to engage it. And yet, *discovering* it, I may just as quickly realize it has escaped my grasp. It's like holding a fistful of water, tightly. Continuing the search, then, requires openness to *possibility*. As Kierkegaard says in relation to Despair, the remedy is to "get possibility, get possibility, possibility is the only salvation!" (Kierkegaard, 1980, pp. 38-39). Similarly, the key to the search is to seek possibility.

And anyway, life is full of surprises. We may come upon an unexpected turn in the road. Or a fork. And as we all know, if we come to a fork in the road, we should, as the inimitable Yogi Berra put it, take it. As we poke around the neighborhood, seeking a connection with spirit, with possibility, we may find we have stumbled across what Binx Bolling calls a "rotation":

A rotation I define as the experiencing of the new beyond the *expectation* of experiencing the new. For example, taking one's first trip to Taxco would not be a rotation, or no more than a very ordinary rotation; but getting lost on the way and finding a secret valley would be. (Percy, 1960, p. 117)

In a good rotation, we must be open to the chance encounter, the small moment, the accidental breakthrough, the tiny secret, the wisp of truth, the hint of something new, something possible, something liminal, something . . . something . . .

You see, we seeking, searching, rotating humans must, simply, open ourselves to the possibility that we are, in the end, only selves-in-relation, engulfed in mystery and wonder.

And it is in this wonder that I find the opening to possibility that is the story I write.

And my own call to action.

My call to action, as I locate possibility, is a simple one: To render the contours of the search in evocative writing.

Sometimes, that writing is dark, nearly despairing, as I walk through the shadowy tunnels of my past traumatic experience. And sometimes it is sublimely hopeful, as I move beyond that tragic past into a bright, open present and a playful, happy, comic future.

The playwright Christopher Fry (1981) tells the story of a friend, who, under the influence of ether, dreamed that he was turning the pages of a great book, which was supposed to have the GREAT ANSWER on the final page. The pages, it turned out, were alternately tragic and comic (much like life), and as he turned each one, he found himself bursting into deep sobs, or erupting into gales of hearty laughter as the story demanded. As he turned the final page, in anticipation of receiving the GREAT ANSWER, he woke up, a tear streaming down his cheek and a smile on his face.

That's life, isn't it? That's the spirit journey I am talking about. We walk a razor's edge, a thin line of separation, a liminal space where we might, at any given moment, fall into tragedy. Or comedy. As Norman

Maclean (1976), author of *A River Runs Through It*, puts it, “Agony and hilarity are *both* necessary for salvation.”

### **Feeling Agony: Hard Times, Tragic Histories**

Today, I stumbled into a hard moment. It was a moment of shame, which, for me, is a living legacy of my past.

It is a blow to realize that, after fifty years on the planet, I have come to believe that I am not worth much. Even as I write these words, and know that they are true, they offer a bitter pill to swallow.

I grew up, as I said, in a family where acceptance was not part of the communication game. We lived in an attack– defend environment, a place of danger, of intrigue, of suspicion. Not an easy place to live.

So I developed several defenses. Mostly, as Tom Frenzt (2008) so penetratingly puts it, I became a snarling wolf on the outside, but I was a sheep—a herd animal (easily *herded* by others)—on the inside. I would attack back, to defend myself, as any self-respecting wolf would. But I was not really self-respecting. I was awash with self-doubt. The sheep in me just ate what others dished out, like so much grass. But instead of passing the grass as fertilizer, I held it inside me, fermenting. Deep inside me, in that place where other, healthier people go for safety and solace, I kept a festering, rotting pile of shame. You see, when someone— my father, or even just your garden-variety playground bully—attacked, there was something in me that always believed that what they were doing was *right*, that I somehow *deserved* to be treated like so much dog shit.

I came to believe that I was no better than a pile of excrement.

To this day, I am plagued by self-doubt.

Of course, all this could be taken as the self-pitying whining of an underdeveloped, though admittedly freshly minted, member of AARP. It could, if you were in a particularly harsh mood. Or if it weren’t for the fact that this terrible internalization of abuse is, well, to put it plainly, a tragic mess.

The problem with the tragic hero, as Aristotle (1967) points out, is that he is so flawed that he has no way out of his predicament. His fate is not a pretty one.

So I turn to reading. I read my friend Bud Goodall’s new piece, “Writing Like a Guy in Textville” (2009), and I learn that not only Norman MacLean but also Kenneth Burke (like Christopher Fry) believed that, “when facing down a crisis of any kind, there are really only two responses: comedy or tragedy. And only comedy offers a hope of a way out” (p. 68).

So, naturally, I find myself searching for a comic solution. In the hope that I may turn out to be a comic hero rather than a tragic one . . . I mount a search.

As I am prone to do.

The first place the search takes me is to the “lashing out like a wolf stage.” Yes, I admit it. I bit my wife Susan’s head off. And chewed it up. And spit it out. I don’t feel good about this—indeed, it just magnifies my shame—but I did it. I learned this method very early in life. If something is bothering you, blame it on someone else. Then take them down just to teach them a lesson.

A very effective “hit and run” strategy, learned at my father’s knee. Effective, that is, if what you want is to inflict injury and suffer further alienation.

But, of course, there is no real satisfaction in that. It's just meaningless slaughter of an innocent bystander, my family's communicative equivalent of a terrorist attack. I just feel more ashamed, more pained, more desolate, more depressed.

So I move to the "licking-my-wounds" stage of the wolf's trajectory. Of course, this also is unsatisfying, as nobody is watching, and now everybody is mad, so nobody cares anyway. My sulking ends quickly.

I give up on the search momentarily.

The next morning, this very morning, a series of soft conversations (perhaps sheep moments, in Frenzt's terms—at least, they seem softer and woollier than my wolf moments) lead to an unleashing of pain and sorrow and grief the likes of which I have not felt in a long, long time.

I fall back in time. And every tragic memory, every moment of pain and suffering, trauma and grief, sorrow and strife, and violence and retribution I have ever experienced floods my memory.

But, at a small pause in the sobs, it hits me.

It doesn't have to be this way.

Communication doesn't have to be a weapon, doesn't only inflict wounds.

Communication can also be a path for/to/through spirit.

I know this because I have had dialogic moments that have, simply, blown me away (Poulos, 2008).

But I find, as I poke around in this tragic mess, that I must go back to the conditions that created it for a moment, to see if I can shed light on a pathway out.

As I said, in my family, communication is often sideways. Perhaps just as often, it is completely upside down. People who are supposed to love you attack you, sometimes brutally. Or they withhold love, as either caution or punishment. Or they "tease" you, sometimes relentlessly, perhaps because to ridicule is simply easier than to love. It's supposed to be funny, but it carries a tragic, rather than a comic, bite. The teasing, which I guess we all fell into, first out of feelings of inferiority—it helps to "even the score" if you add some verbal injury as a defense/deflection strategy—we continued later merely out of habit. All of which leads to that silence I wrote of a few pages back, the heavy, silencing silence of reproach and retribution.

It is instructive at this point to think about the ramifications of all this, not just for my one life, but for us all.

It is instructive to note that most communication *theories* proceed from an assumption of *exposure* and *disclosure*. In Nacirema culture (Philipsen, 1992), we privilege openness, supportiveness, honesty, and clarity. But many communication *practices* operate from a position of *defense* and *withholding*, privileging instead silence and defensiveness and deceit and obfuscation.

There is much violence implicit in this latter set of strategies. It is defensive violence to be sure, as most of what is going on is from wounded people trying to protect themselves from potential slaughter. So we became offensively defensive. As they say, the best defense is a good offense.

There is nothing more offensive than verbal or physical violence.

So, as I grew up, I was taunted, teased, ridiculed, baited, attacked, beaten, tormented, and even punched.

By my own family.

It takes a moment to swallow those words.

A victim of violence is a tragic creature.

Even as I write that last sentence, it occurs to me, just as obviously, almost blindingly, that a *perpetrator* of violence is also a tragic creature.

Of course, I learned, with the best of them, to dish it back. As I said, I'm a pretty good snarling wolf. Downright vicious, if I choose to be.

The trouble with wolves is that they harm whatever they bite. Our jaws are powerful.

As I ponder the communication in my family, I wonder if it *must* be this way, or if, perhaps, we are all just stuck in a pattern that we don't recognize and therefore don't change. Or maybe we recognize it all too well and are just loath to change it.

After all, change means risk, as does real communication (Levinas, 1981).

We might be afraid of what we would find if we let down our guard.

Maybe for some people love is scarier than war.

Still, sensing I am ready, hoping for a way out of what I now recognize as a destructive—at the very least self-destructive—pattern, I continue the search. Frenz (2008) recommends the trickster as the character who may lead us out of tragedy toward a bit of comic—and maybe even cosmic—relief. Maybe he's right. Though Frenz prefers Coyote, an image I have always found affinity with, I can think of no better trickster than the wily Odysseus, a human coyote perhaps, but one to whom I, with my big fat Greek roots, can easily relate.

### **Improvisational Odysseys**

Homer's (1998) hero, as you may remember, was always getting into jams. He was confronted, time and again, with creatures who wanted to waylay him, or destroy him. And he found himself using his wits—and a little help from his friends—to improvise a way out.

It is the classic hero's journey (Campbell, 1949).

The hero, called to adventure by an interruption, works his way downward, into the darkness. Along the way, he meets obstacles and foes, but he also meets helpers who facilitate the continuation of his odyssey. And he develops—or perhaps discovers within himself—certain qualities that come in handy. He finds that he is smart, articulate, cagey, courageous, powerful, energetic, and capable of leadership. He discovers, through his hardships and the improvisational talents he cultivates in response to them, that he has a gift to give back to his home community, his family.

Odysseus begins as a wolf—a warrior. But he enters Troy as the quintessential coyote, the trickster. His later predicaments force him to continue cultivating coyote energy: The wily problem solver. But as he makes his way back home, in order to bring a gift to his family, his community, he must shape-shift once again. In the end, it turns out, Odysseus's gift is an amalgam of loyalty, wits, strength, courage, and wisdom—the gifts of a true leader, neither a sheep nor a wolf nor a coyote, but a shepherd (Frenz, 2008). He has to set aside his “wild” streak, or at least tame it. Thus, through his journey, he is transformed from wolf to coyote to dog.

More on that in a moment.

My own improvisational odyssey begins when I was very young. Two stories from my earliest memories are emblematic of the possibilities I am seeking here.

When I was roughly two years old, my brother, a year and a half older than me, apparently decided to introduce some diversity in the family. At least, he later told my parents that he just really wanted a “brown brother.” So he painted me with deck paint. As all paint was oil-based at the time, the only way out for me was an unhappily uncomfortable turpentine bath. A gallon of paint gets a lot of coverage on an undersized two-year-old boy!

My memory of all this begins three weeks later, as I stand near our back door, looking outside. I have a very strong visual memory of this moment; I can see it vividly, clearly, in my mind’s eye, right here, right now, as I write these words. I see my brother sitting on the back porch, his back to the door. I also spy my father’s heavy black wing-tipped shoe. And I instantly see opportunity. I lift the shoe, and take a good, hard swing at the back of my brother’s head. He pitches forward, face first into the grass, unconscious. Improvisation leads to sweet revenge.

Now *that* is a genuine wolf moment!

The second story involves getting lost in the forest. A little over a year later, I wander out of our new home and into the forest that lurks nearby. I am very quickly lost, as there are really no paths to follow. In the forest, I learn quickly (and again) that, when you don’t know what to do, you have to improvise. I find my way out eventually, and I never forget that search. It would be the key to the path I would follow for the rest of my life. I have been improvising my way into and out of pathless forests, imagined and real, spiritual and physical and emotional, ever since.

Out in the forest, I became a coyote.

These childhood memories remind me of my own children. Perhaps the ultimate odyssey—as I see it, a long journey of multiple improvisational moments—is that of being a parent. Unlike the new TV or dishwasher, kids don’t come with an instruction manual. But who am I kidding? Nobody reads those things anyway. Still, I have sometimes wished there was some sort of manual to consult. My kids have thrown me so many curveballs, so many surprises . . .

Like the day when my oldest son, Eli, comes to me and says, “I want to learn how to play the guitar.” This is something of a surprise, since, a couple of years earlier, he had tried to play the trumpet. And he *hated* the trumpet. But I find myself saying, “OK, Let’s figure this out.” Next thing I know, I am buying a knock-off Fender Stratocaster and a portable amplifier.

And a remarkable thing happens that day. The kid, with no training at all, straps on the guitar, plugs it in, and plays a recognizable classic rock ‘n roll riff.

A few months later, now with some lessons under his belt, he brashly decides to audition for the jazz band at the high school he will attend the following fall. On a warm spring day, he walks into the band room, straps on his “Strat,” and plays—you guessed it—Jimi Hendrix’s “Purple Haze.” The middle-aged band director accepts him on the spot. Never underestimate the power of nostalgia!

Now four years later, my son (who is today a real jazz musician, with solid chops) and I have regular conversations about jazz, about jazz as a metaphor for life, for performance, for communication. We have conversations about improvising, about improvising our way out of jams, or into *jamming*, about how a good musician—and, by extension, a good person—can turn a mistake into just a turn in the road, about how making music (and maybe making life) is more than just playing the notes; it’s about getting the notes (and ourselves) to *play* (in all the various meanings of that word). These conversations have taken on more significance lately, as I, for the

first time in my fifty years on the planet, have begun attempting to learn— haltingly, to be sure—how to play an instrument—in my case, the piano.

I think I chose the piano not just because there was one sitting in our living room—though that certainly made it more convenient—and not just because it sits there in such black and white dichotomous beauty, its silence taunting me with its oh-so-elegant right and wrongness—but also because I needed, somewhere deep inside me, to go back to my childhood in a new way.

I needed to be eight again.

I needed a do-over.

I needed to make some mistakes and have it be OK, not a source of shame but a part of a natural process.

Now I am nowhere near skilled enough yet to be improvising anything on the piano, but I have begun to learn some lessons that are relevant to my search.

First, I have learned that simple is good. Little, simple configurations of notes can actually, with a little effort and a dash of rhythm, become recognizable songs.

Second, I have learned that mistakes are good. Mistakes sound bad, but they are obvious on the piano, and so they are instructive. Actually, the piano is more forgiving than I expected, since even a bad mistake doesn't sound *that* bad, coming out of such a pretty instrument. Maybe life is more forgiving than I have suspected.

Third, I have learned that, if you do make a mistake, you can play it again, Sam. You get as many do-overs as you need.

Fourth, I have learned that it is very, very good to cultivate what the Buddhists so aptly call the “beginner’s mind.” It is a refreshingly open place to sit. There is something very good about mindful absorption in the present moment (Hanh, 1992).

Fifth, I have learned that, with practice, I can get better at anything I do. Gradually.

I’m betting I may even be able to get better at life.

And one day, I may get good enough to improvise again.

I think of improvisation, you see, as a way of life. Improvisation as a way of life means that the improvisational/creative spirit is significant, meaningful, powerful, compelling . . . in all areas and aspects of life, from music to communication to love to finding and living what the Greeks called “the good life” which issues forth from that way of being in the world that has us searching for virtue (*arête*) in every situation. Most recently, I have written about what I’ve come to call “accidental ethnography” (Poulos, 2009).

Accidental ethnography is, among other things, about being *ready* when something potentially significant erupts into my world—a sign, a hint, a clue, a dream, a whisper, a secret, a fragment of a memory, an aside, a look (sharp or otherwise), an innuendo, a surge of energy, a moment of passion, an inspiration, a small smile, a direction or misdirection. Readiness is about being practiced, and trained, and open—about being in tune, somehow, so that, while not knowing what might come up, I may somehow figure out how to improvise a way into and through an evocative, compelling story.

Like learning to play piano, the craft of accidental ethnography is about learning enough about searching and researching and writing and rewriting to develop a command of the keys and the notes and the chords and the

small, simple tunes of language. It is about building enough of a command of the knowledge, the skill, the agility, the discipline, and the joy of writing within the structure of the game to begin to improvise ways to break or exceed the rules of the game, to bust paradigms, or at least to improvise an interesting turn of the story tune. It is about how, stumbling along into the search, tripping headlong into an epiphany, or maybe even a full revelation, I might tap the ethnographic imagination (Goodall, 1996) with creative grace—and thus craft the next stage of my narrative journey.

Which brings me back to jazz—which, in the end, is the music of justice and democracy and mutual respect. Jazz, and its brother, the blues, began as a way to turn hardship into beauty using the discarded tools of conquering soldiers. It is music of the people, by the people, for the people. Jazz, like most good music, serves as a way to transcend—to transcend pain, oppression, hardship, grief, suffering, or even just the doldrums of ordinariness.

Jazz is a way out—and thus, perhaps a way in. And the key to the door is improvisation.

Which, of course, takes me to the sought-after moment in *this* odyssey, my comic release.

It comes one day in the form of an e-mail from a friend, one of those you almost ignore because it's one of those "You have to look at this" e-mails. You hope it's not a bad joke, and you almost skip over it. But something in the tone of that "You have to" command—or maybe it's just the potential guilt you'd feel for not valuing something a friend sent you, or maybe it's just procrastination from unpleasant work that looms, or just a little distraction. In any event, something draws you to click on the link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jedd2FiZTqM>.

The link leads to something called "Bodhisattva in metro." In the film, a man sits down among weary commuters on a light rail train. Gradually, he begins laughing, for no apparent reason. He just laughs. And laughs. And laughs.

And something starts to happen.

Nobody speaks, but the laughter catches on—haltingly at first, but it catches on. And before you know it, the whole train is laughing. For no other reason than . . . well, they are laughing.

Just as the fire is fully lit, the Bodhisattva who started it all gets off the train and gets on another. In the background, you hear him begin to laugh . . .

After I stop laughing, I wonder if there might be a clue here.

### **Comic Movements**

Today, I walk in the door of my home, and my dog, Jessie, greets me, as usual, with a bark, followed by a vigorous wagging that begins at the tail but simply cannot be called a wagging tail, as it clearly is not confined to that vicinity. It is more like a wagging of the whole body, which is, in turn, perhaps a wagging of the spirit of this spirited creature. And then, she throws herself down on the ground, belly up, still wagging furiously.

As I reach down to rub her tummy, I can swear she is laughing at me.

I am *so* easy.

And it hits me.

The dog is onto something.

Perhaps it is time to admit that I am, in my essence, no sheep. I am just not one to be herded. But I am also not really, at my core, a wolf (*canis lupus*, too ruthless), nor coyote (*canis latrans*, too clever), but the fully evolved version of the genus, the ordinary domestic dog (*canis lupus familiaris*, the familiar one).

The dog: Fiercely loyal, protective (that is to say, predatory only when necessary), smart, loving, friendly, energetic, joyous, affectionate, in-the-moment, and, almost certainly, comical. My dogs, Jake and Jessie, border collies, know how to improvise. They are an especially smart breed, at the top of *canis lupus familiaris*.

I like to think that, if I really was a dog, I'd be a border collie.

The best part: The dog lets go of the past, only saving the lessons of experience that help it survive, and thrive, without the weight of shame or guilt or pent-up grief.

I know Tom Frenzt identifies with the coyote. That's Tom—he really is a trickster. But my nature is different. I am less at ease disrupting, more at ease getting along. For me, the wolf was a last resort, the snarling act of the trapped. And coyote, though powerful, is a character I prefer to call upon only when needed.

But the dog—the dog is really who I am, and who I aspire to be. The dog knows how to live, *with others*. The dog also knows how to *play*. The dog knows what to do, right here, right now.

Besides, wolves are always shown as the bad guys. They generally end up getting shot. Or poisoned. Or put in cages. Coyotes too, for that matter. But dogs know how to get along with people.

### **Continuing the Search**

So now I search, every day, not for THE GREAT ANSWER, but for an *approach* to what I think of as one potential core practice of a spiritual journey toward possibility. And for small moments of soft laughter.

For a chance to wag my tail in simple, everyday joy.

In essence, what I hope for is that I will be attuned, once again, to the hints, the signs, the little waves of memory, the unexpected rotations, and the eruptions of accidental epiphany that may occur as I proceed with my search.

All this is aimed at what I think can be one of life's most transcendent experiences: The act of creation, the writing of a good story.

As an accidental ethnographer, I seek, I hope, I pray —to stumble upon the unexpected possibilities in the little eruptions of memory, in the shadowy draw of the dream, in the small tugging of the heart, in the tiny shards of secrets that slip out into words, in the little silences that fall into our dialogue, in the large silences of nature, in the communal silence of Friends gathered, in the edges of laughter that hint at both joy and despair, in the traumas and the losses of life, in the everyday and in the extraordinary, in the hints and signs and innuendoes that are there for the mining if we are just attentive enough, in the twinkle of an eye, in the pumping of a heart, in the burden, and in the treasure, in the story shared and the one half told, and in the conversations small and large that I fall into every day. I am on a search.

A search, it turns out, for a good story.

And for something that will give the story just the shove it needs so that it stumbles over the edge, from the tragic to the comic.

Perhaps just a little wag of a tail.

Or a small smile flickering at the corners of a mouth.

And in the story, I find, once again, the connection I need.

After all, that is really why we are here, isn't it?

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