

The Coward

It had never been clear to him why he was here on this planet. You have often heard him declaim annoyingly, gratingly, upon the purpose of life.

He believed he had been put here to be humiliated. 'You'll never be good enough', they told him.

Good enough for what?

He was expected, like everyone else, to make something of himself. But nobody really cared what he made of himself, just as long as he stayed out of the way, and was not a burden to anyone.

Not that he hadn't tried to do as they wished. But he often thought if he could somehow get his hands on a lot of money, he would be able to achieve their aims, or his, a lot more easily.

He had no head for 'business'; that is, he did not have the mentality, or morality, if that says it better, for business. At least he seemed not inclined to make his way by fleecing his fellow man, or by converting the planet into a standard of living.

He didn't have the courage to become a bank robber. If anything, he might become a petty thief. But he was even too cautious for that; afraid of the consequences, if discovered.

The author is getting ahead of himself in this writing.

His formative years were not much different than anyone else's amongst the struggling masses. His parents were only a little less conventional than all the other parents; but they were none the less marked by their poverty; or should one say, social status.

Yes, social status. Not very classy.

He lived in a special time and a special place. His teachers had told him how fortunate he was to be living in his day and age. That they were living at the apex of civilization, that our nation had come out on top with its values, with its freedoms and liberties; and its assets.

It didn't really sink in what the teacher was saying, because he had no real wish to know what she was telling him. It didn't mean anything.

His keenest interest was in girls, and baseball. Girls, the ones that interested him the most, seemed very remote, of another class, with their pretty dresses and their neatness, and their cleanliness. The girls, probably without intending to do so, humiliated and intimidated him. They seemed to want to have nothing to do with him. The poor girls were aiming higher than he, and the rich ones were ashamed to be seen talking to him.

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Baseball was a lauded activity. All the boys, regardless of social status, were somehow involved in the sport. But of course, it was those from the upper strata that were chosen first for the school team. If all the positions were filled by the classy, then he was consigned to the sidelines. Besides he was only an average player. He wasn't a very good pitcher. His favorite positions were first base and left field. He didn't like being behind the plate. He could switch hit, but often he couldn't get a good piece of the ball; he'd ground out or pop up. He was an average runner and an average fielder. So baseball, like girls, seemed another opportunity for humiliation. Not good enough.

Not to dwell entirely on the more negative aspect, the pickup games of baseball were satisfying, those that occurred in the village in the off hours away from the school setting. There was no social status involved, nobody to impress. One was needed to make up a team. The teams were decided by a novel means. Choose Up! Usually the two best ball players would choose who they wanted on their side by choosing alternately. The first choice was decided, not by flipping a coin, but by using the bat, which was given a toss by one of the good players toward the other good player. He would catch the bat in one hand somewhere on the handle. There he would grip it while the other player would place his hand around the handle above the other hand on the narrower end. And once again a hand from the first, and again for the second, until there was but enough room left between the enlarged button on the end for at least two fingers of the last hand. That player would be the first to choose another player for the start of his team, followed by the other good player, alternately, until all the boys, occasionally a girl, would fill out a team, often without a sufficient number to comprise a complete team. He was more or less assured a chance to play, only because there were so few, but the good player would assign the positions and the batting order. Our protagonist refused to be a catcher. He was never chosen to pitch, often he would play first base or in the outfield, and bat somewhere on the tail end of the order. Every now and then, to his own amazement, and sometimes to others, he would get a good piece of the ball, sending it flying over the outfielders head.

It could have been soccer, which he had played at the Catholic School. But at the Catholic School they also played baseball. While some players were obviously more skilled than others, the nuns did not encourage an hierarchy of players. They were very democratic in insisting that each player was given an opportunity to play a different position, and to bat in a different order, and that all, regardless of their skill, were afforded an opportunity to play. That was when he learned that he did not want to be a catcher. He

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had the misfortune to be behind the plate without a mask. A foul tip caught him in the eye, nose, resulting in seeing a lot of stars during the daytime, as well as a very painful blow, and a bloody nose, and a swollen, very painful black eye; it worried the nuns for a while. However it did not dim his enthusiasm for the game. He could not remember feeling humiliated at the Catholic School. There was not a social structure there. Perhaps it was so that all were from the lower rungs of society. But more importantly the nuns observed a basic tenet, in that they were all God's children regardless of size, shape, or origin. The nuns discouraged bullying, punishing those who sought to physically dominate others.

But when he went to public school, things were different. There was no church every morning before breakfast. There was no catechism, no ritualized praying, or bowing or kneeling or crossing of oneself. There was no soap in ones mouth if he swore, or took the name of the Lord in vain. There was no mandatory confession to the priest on Saturday. No Rosary. Also there was no choir. He didn't miss the exhortations of Church. But there were no nuns keeping score. There was his father at home, and the hierarchy, social status and pecking order, at the public school. Caught between the proverbial and the proverbial. Somehow he became more of a nonentity.

And there were the ever present rules, often construed as hard and fast laws. As long as one framed everything in the context of the Golden Rule, the strictures governing one's life seemed to have a reasonable basis. But when obvious violations of that basic precept entered one's life, living took on a different meaning. One was challenged to enforce the rule, but often was too cowardly to do so. Bullying, intimidation, tyranny, became a fact of life. It was unfair. If one complained, he was further intimidated. One does not rat on his fellow, an unwritten law, but a bastard extension of the Golden Rule (would you want someone to rat on you?). Magnanimity coming from the larger was a rare thing. Sportsmanship was considered a social grace on the playing field. But off the playing field, one had better be on his guard. There were those pecking order fisticuffs, "don't call my mother a bitch", "you and whose army?" altercations, where one would come away with a bloody nose, or loose teeth, humiliated, beaten down, forced into a position which inspired revenge. But even revenge required courage, and he was a coward.

His father was an enforcer of his own arbitrary rules and values. His father made him into an adjunct thing, intended for chores. His father regarded him as a moron because of his preoccupation with 'sports', especially baseball. His father was an anomaly, a social freak. As was his offspring. His father was too

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huge to be challenged. Questioning father would be asking for some kind of punishing verbal onslaught, if not the wrath of the switch.

Not very happy beginnings.

When I asked him what were his fondest memories of his youth, he spoke of the forests, the stream, the seasons, the wildlife. He did not speak of the girls, because there were none, only symbolically. He did not speak of the schools, or the sports.

When I asked him if there was anything he had done of which he might feel guilt or shame, he mentioned his petty thieving. Looking back, he felt he might have been a bit of a klepto. He told of stealing money, change, from the high school girl's coats, kept in their lockers, located outside the school principle's office. And how he really got in a fix when he had taken a fountain pen, just like the one his father had, from the desk of one of the high school girls. The teacher made everyone stay after school until someone 'fessed up' about the missing pen. He told of how he had asked to leave the classroom, coming back with the pen, saying he had found it in the hall. Such a transparent thing, but they let him go without any further comment. Then he told of time he had carved a piece off the big fruit-filled chocolate Easter egg that his father had got for his mother, than was packed away in a bureau drawer. He thought no one would notice; but his father had. And he told how he lied to his father about it, and how his father didn't accept his denial. He told of how he remembered standing there with his arms folded in front of himself, angering his father, who could tell from all the outward manifestations that he was not telling the truth. Again, another transparent thing that really enraged his father, who finally grabbed and beat him. But he did not admit to the deed.

And later, on his first job, he would once in a while slip a coin, or a candy bar in his pocket. And he would put extra toppings, or extra syrup on his school associates orders when they came in for a banana split or a milkshake. Then the store owner let him go without saying anything. And his next job, he did the same thing, sneaking candy bars; and again he was let go without saying anything. It was not that he wasn't competent or a hard worker, he just wasn't trustworthy. Perhaps if those employers had said something and challenged him as his father had, he might have grown more fearful of consequences. Just because they were 'petty crimes' didn't in any way excuse them.

Then he said it all evens out in the end. As a matter of fact he felt the net loser in the way of the distribution of goods. What he might have done to move things around was more boldly accomplished by others, when someone had stolen his children's

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money he was taking to the bank for deposit, or when someone had stolen one of his wood carvings from his desk in his office, or when someone removed parts from his parked vehicle, or when finally someone broke into his house and removed all the valuables, some of them very precious to his wife.

He admitted to other petty thievings, ones that if known might have caused him a great deal of difficulty with his employers, or the law.

He mentioned a loan he had obtained from the big urban company where he worked which he had never paid. It was a place where he had worked very hard, and very diligently, harder than anyone else, but because he was emotionally worn out by a failing love affair, he decided to leave the city, leaving behind his debt and whatever he could not carry in his automobile. Later he learned the company wrote a very understanding letter to his parents. Perhaps his mother paid the debt; that was never mentioned, but the company never pursued him in the matter. He told of how he had had two automobiles repossessed for defaulting on payments. But he could not repossess the vehicle for which he was not paid which he had sold to a friend who had disappeared over the hill, into the sunset. But he had to recall that he hadn't paid his brother for his share of an automobile they had purchased together.

He did not seem to consider these as hard lessons; he saw them as consequences; somehow not unjust; the theft of the carving excepted. He did tell of the time he was put in jail for something for which he was completely innocent, and how it frightened and enraged him. How the man with the gun, the enforcer of the law, becomes a very overpowering reality. This was his first and last personal lesson regarding "Justice is in the interest of the stronger", which Socrates, through the dialectical method, had attempted to disprove.

But all in all, he might have considered himself fortunate that all the just consequences did not make a mess of his life. And as the final measure of the justness of this life the event that hurt him the most was the theft of his wood carving from his desk, in an environment in which he might have felt most secure.

The author didn't feel any necessity in asking him what lessons he might have learned. The author didn't imagine him attempting to rationalize any of it. The author assumed, as he assessed his own worth, he might not feel good about some things he had done. Even though his ledger is far outweighed by the good things, he could not deny the other. His underwear was soiled.

The last experience he had of this kind involved a theft of some parts from a VW located on his property. He had called the RCMP, who had advised him to confront those whom he suspected. At first

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he had assumed the wrong party whom he did not confront directly, fortunately, but whose proximity could not fail to notice the sign he posted, and who responded most indignantly to the implications. But who also offered other possibilities, one of which led to the confrontation suggested. The confrontation took place over the telephone with the father of a suspected boy. It wasn't too long before the boy appeared to admit his theft, but denying he was a thief. We all have our excuses; he recognized his, but told him if he returned what he had taken, putting it back where he found it, he would say nothing.

After this experience, he became convinced of the universality of man's lightfingerness, his temptations, his opportunities, and finally, his multitude of rationalizations. He also thought of the punishment in some middle eastern countries where the severing of the offending hand was considered fair and just.

To continue further into his life, he indicated, that although he did not seem to fit anywhere, either at home, or outside the home, there was some kind of saving grace, if that is how one might characterize it. He believed in his feelings; he believed in something inner, perhaps in the life force. He believed he was right in what he sensed and felt, apart from what I have just related regarding theft, shame and regrets, even though there was great difficulty putting these feelings into words.

There was no call for 'bravery'. To defend oneself, maybe, which he seemed unable to do with much conviction, either physically, or verbally. Cowardly, to avoid hurt and humiliation. There was no call to learn how to bring down a wild creature for survival, or pleasure, or any proximate call to arms to fend off the neighboring tribe. The issue of bravery or cowardice seemed more of an imposition than something required for survival.

Survival of what? Of whom? How? When? Why?

A neighbor, too lazy to construct an adequate fence to keep out the deer from his garden, told of having to shoot a deer that had eaten all of his tomatoes. In visiting another neighbor who had a vineyard whose grapes suffered the ravages of the pileated woodpecker he told of shooting one the critters that took off in crooked flight. He mentioned to this neighbor the experience of his other neighbor, adding that was one way to get harvest one's tomatoes, by eating the eater, to which the second neighbor surmised, 'well I could try wringing the neck of the woodpecker to get my grape juice'.

Were we not told we were civilized? What did it mean to be civilized?

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While the classroom proved a dull experience on nearly every front, something of what was said seeped in, more than enough just to pass the examinations. A kind of idealism, a way to look at human society, as a planned and workable thing, based on reason and practicality, however unrealistic outside the classroom. One might aspire to things even more impossible.

One heard of the minute men who sounded the alarm, who took to arms to rid themselves of an oppressor. Brave men. But one better know what he is doing, and he better have the resolve and the superior strength or skill to get rid of an oppressor, wherever he lives, despite the famous rant of Patrick Henry.

Mankind comes by oppression easily enough; his recorded history seems to reveal an unbroken chain of events that have witnessed upheaval after upheaval of the throwing off of oppressors. The urge to dominate and control has been with the species interminably. It does little good to debate it, or question its validity. It just is. Even though it would confound the ideals of everyman, it still is. Perhaps not everyman, because some are just naturally selfish, and would seek to gain and maintain any advantage over his look-a-likes. Asking "Why?" does not illicit an answer.

As an idealist, one might become possessed, Quixotic, sufficiently so, to take up arms, to use force to bring about a world obedient to humanitarian principles. But that requires courage, perhaps foolhardiness, perhaps blind faith, because any reasonably aware person would know that the human being is consistently hopelessly incorrigible.

As more of a realist one might attempt to achieve the same end, but by more subtle and devious means, that would still require dedication and courage. The courage to persist, the will to persist. By, God damn it, if he pounds hard enough on someone's body and soul, he will fashion that good person. Oneself, first.

One might say it requires a certain amount of bravery just to exist in this awful world of man. The amount of bravery or cowardice is relevant to the existing conditions.

Some would laugh at him, saying he yielded to convenience, the least path of resistance, naively believing that this was the best of all possible worlds. Believing in something that was more implicit than explicit. That 'all in this together' thing. That government for the people and by the people assured for an equitable thing that was not manifest in its documents, but assumed none the less. One high sounding phrase leads to another, perhaps unwarrantedly assumed, but assumed none the less, out of convenience, out of the desire rather to believe than to disbelieve.

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Even he soon learned that things were not as he had assumed. It did not mean he disbelieved. But what was he to do about the disagreement he felt between the assumed and the real. Was it worth any particular effort to bring them into consonance with each other. They would still laugh at him, scoffing at his idealism.

But if the truth were to be fully told, he fudged on the ideals, when convenience or opportunity presented itself. He could violate his own tenets, he could break with the Golden Rule, not in big ways. His integrity, if put to the test, might fail.

But for all that, he was a reasonable person, he listened to reason, he was persuaded by reason. He was not arbitrary, not especially willful.

Early in his life, he responded instinctively to the wrongs he sensed, being aware that he had committed wrongs. Later in his life, in his readings he found comfort in the writings of others who provided the substance, in words, to what he had been feeling from his first awarenesses.

Class distinctions, social hierarchies, social inequities, status and stratifications, however achieved, whether through wealth, breeding, ethnicity, were all anathema to his perception, and understanding of a fair and even handed society. Some would argue there are natural separations, natural hierarchies, a natural rising above the mass; individuals with special abilities, who become leaders. Who give direction and purpose to a nation of peoples. He might assent to that argument, but would not be compromised by it, would not feel it was sufficient to create the condition he resented, the one's dominion over the other. He might stupidly, stubbornly, cling to a notion of equity beyond any hope of compromise, or hope of realization. To him, one human life was as worthy as any other; a first principle. He believed all forms of life were as deserving of the same respect and the same regard as any human life. Life, itself was the point of departure, the point of reverence and true appreciation for the marvel it was. That is what he truly believed, and was always generally prepared to argue for it, not courageously, necessarily, not as a matter of courage or bravery, but as matter of empathy, reverence, and reason.

If a government official inferred he was unpatriotic because he opposed the rape of the environment in order to build a strong nation, he would cower because he knew the government could use any means to get what it wanted, and all opposition would suffer harsh blows in the name of national security. But it wasn't just the environment, it was his right to live as he sought, it was his right to question the presumptions of government. But the government gave itself powers to deal with opposition, and it was

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remorseless and often brutal in its application of its construed prerogatives.

This is one of the destinations to which this story is intended to arrive, but the author begs further indulgence as he recounts other matters pertaining to the education of a coward.

In his matriculate days, as an attendee in public school, a very small rural one at that, he performed well enough to be on a basketball team, some of his ability being incorporated into his height, but not in his ball handling. He was a bothersome and oppressive defensive player, perhaps his greatest asset. But he was not good enough to be a varsity player or to qualify for a seat in the bus next to a cheerleader. In those days one never heard of the Olympics; one supposes because there were no sporting activities, like track or swimming, or gymnastic competitions, as part of the rural school curriculum. It was the two bs, baseball and basketball, and six-man football. He did not qualify to be a baseball player, and he was much too skinny and light to be a football player. The nearest one came to the Olympics was the picture in his Social Studies (History) reader showing the sculpted Discus Thrower of very ancient times in Greece, perhaps below Mt. Olympus.

Perhaps if wrestling had been a school activity he might have succeeded well because he was very strong for his weight, and relatively quick when it came to defensive maneuverings. And if he could somehow change a fisticuff embroilment into a wrestling altercation, he would usually triumph with his scissors grip. Although he might be outweighed by some considerable amount, it wouldn't matter where he might apply the grip, either to the neck or the torso of his opponent, the opponent would be forced to yield.

His problem with fisticuffs was his inability to assume some of the dirty tricks of his opponent. Fisticuffs was like boxing to him; again his defensive skills being his asset. But often his opponent wasn't into fisticuffs to box, he was in it to thrash. And if thrashing meant grabbing and punching, or hitting below the belt, or gouging, then he was bound to end up the loser. One time he managed to subdue a very heavy opponent bent on thrashing him, by wrestling him to the ground atop of him, only to have his opponent grab his head of hair to pull it down to where he could bite his ear, much like a famous boxer of ill-repute did in a much publicized heavyweight championship bout. He did not bite back, perhaps a mistake.

While one might learn of minute men and eternal vigilance as applied to his ancestors, he felt such considerations had been

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waived, and made unnecessary by the Declaration Of Independence, and the Constitution Of The United States Of America. He had it made.

After those years of matriculation, he became a laborer only requiring minimal skills, mostly those of alertness, and certain repetitive motions of his hands and body, on production lines. Until the days he was pursued with registered letters from his draft board, which he elected not to receive, until it became clear he would not be able to escape induction into the military. He therefore chose to enlist into a branch of the military that was least likely to put him on the front lines.

Thereupon he entered into a new field of indoctrination. Not much bravery was required of him as a non-combatant, nor was there any opportunity for cowardice. Most of his brave acts involved his stubborn refusal to become a model sailor. While intimidated by the power the military has over one's life, he was not about to allow the military to force him to become something he was not. He was not outspoken, because he wanted to stay out of the brig, the extra duty, and the onerous punishments. But within himself, he hated the conformity, the pulling of rank, the chicken shit, petty stuff enforced upon everyone to teach them obedience. He had done well in his schooling in the military, and because of that he had avoided combat as he had chosen. But it was the chicken shit, petty stuff that forced him in the end to ask to be released from the military. It was his bravest act while in the military. He had to unwaveringly stick to his guns while the powers that be attempted to intimidate him, to humiliate him, to belittle him, to accuse him of shirking his duty. He was released without too much fanfare, not dishonorably discharged, just let go after a cursory period of psychiatric observation; later he appraised his own value to the military by saying 'they needed me like they needed another deadeye'. Not gung ho, not a patriot. Not someone who even knew why it was necessary to be in the military; it was just the government's power over one's self. Oh Yeah! That stuff about Communism about which one knew nothing, except that it was trying to take over the world. Just another manifestation of the tyrannical thing that we just got through fighting in Germany and Japan. We were like the pure white Crusaders of Richard the Lionhearted. We could not do any wrong. We were the ones chosen to fight the evil empire in Korea, the War into which he had enlisted, upon the threat of induction. He didn't have enough brains or convictions to apply for CO status. Not being a willing combatant out of ignorance and conviction did not qualify him for exemption. Every idiot must serve, every idiot must become a

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patriot, and put his life on the line for 'our way of life'. That is the purpose of life, of every idiot's, to serve.

Its anyone's guess what he might have done if placed on the front lines, especially when fired upon. Kill or be killed. A test he never had to endure.

Later, in another war, when they asked the politician, one of the peace candidates, what it would require for him to take up arms, he admitted, if they were knocking down his front door he would have to do something. But he was an equivocator, like all politicians; for a while he was saying LBJ all the way, whether to show solidarity, or as a calculated political move. But when it looked like LBJ was on the way out he jumped on the bandwagon for peace. Then somebody killed him; on the front lines of a political campaign, somebody who had another ax to grind that had nothing to do with the war at hand.

Our protagonist was not unhappy that the equivocator had been snuffed. He had already thought of him as a jackal. But, in principle, and in fact, he had no quarrel with jackals. Perhaps its human beings behaving like jackals that was disturbing to him.

I thought I ought look upon myself reflected in the mirror.

It took a great act of courage (or foolhardiness) to exit the military.