

Night Hawk Way: Poems and Essays
1987 – 1999
By Teri Ekland



Between 1979 and 1986 I taught English at universities and language schools in Oregon, Thailand, China, Kuwait, and Boston, Massachusetts. I spent one summer studying Spanish in Guatemala and one summer studying international law in Israel. In May of 1994, I earned a Juris Doctor Degree at Arizona State University. From Portland State University, I earned a Master's in English and an undergraduate degree in anthropology.

Other than going to ASU College of Law during my years on Night Hawk Way, I worked in my home office on projects, often in collaboration with my engineer husband Don Ellis. We once planned to launch a periodical called "In a Word, to Be Absurd." It didn't work out nor did my becoming an attorney. However, during these suburbanite years I found inspiration to write poetry, memoirs, and novels. Two of my favorite poems occurred to me on Night Hawk Way: "In My Pockets there are Carried" and "A Moment Stretched across the Room."

During this productive time, I wrote two memoirs and the first drafts to six novels. When the internet came along, my husband and I designed websites and I incorporated our company, Arastar Internet. At this time, I had a large number of pen pals from around the world—Africa, Russia, Fiji, Australia, Europe, South America, and I dabbled in an import-export business and

made websites using my international friends as Arastar agents. All from my front office on Night Hawk Way.

The following poems and essays are from the ten years I lived on Night Hawk Way, Ahwatukee, Arizona. It was a quiet, unimposing life with my first husband; the years passed by without children and I never worked outside the house. My Night Hawk years are very plain and proper. When we moved to the rural desert in 1998, my world fell apart. At the time, we had about seven cats. Cats were a big part of my life on Night Hawk Way.



Modeling for my import export internet business World Products Inc.

Part I: Poems from Night Hawk Way



A Moment Stretched Across the Room

A moment stretched across the room
Where spools of yarn play with cats
And windows open for Arizona sunshine
In winter's polluted but wonderful air.
Where trees outside are silly creatures
Offering branches to the

Sweet songs of nightingales
That are never there.

No.
Here are house finches—males with red Shakespeare collars
To decorate their feather pride.
They come to the window for seed
Put out to amuse the cats.
And here are warblers, thrashers, and Gila woodpeckers
That make houses in idols
Tall and green
With trifurcated thorns.

The moment now wears no clothes
Although sometimes
It beholds
The collar of a nightingale.

(Meaning and comments 2-27-2022): A literal poem with imagery and metaphor. On NHW, I was a cat person. At one time I had eight cats. When I was living in Pattani, Thailand, my missionary neighbor had a Siamese cat and she let me keep one of its kittens. I have always loved animals but Thailand is where I fell in love with cats. When I returned home to the US and hooked up Don who became my first spouse, we moved to Boston and I bought two Siamese cats. I found Mai Tai as a kitten in a pet store I was passing by. He was 200 dollars and I had to have him. Then we bought Ginseng from a private home as a mate for Mai Tai. But the male cat began spraying so we had him neutered and Ginseng fixed. We moved to Phoenix because of a job opportunity for Don. We married and bought the house on NHW. Then I began to acquire cats. The first addition after the Siamese was a small affectionate stray whose tail was hanging off. We found her outside the veterinarian's office where we were taking the Siamese. I named her Chandala after the Hindi name for an untouchable. (I was working on my memoir "Moonbeams in Asia" at the time and had been researching Hinduism). Chandala took off one day, after three years, and that was that. Then Damian came along. He was a yellow tabby the

neighbors didn't want. Then came Andrew, a black tuxedo cat I nicknamed Monsieur. I found him in our lantana bushes. The next cat I found at the edge of our subdivision, near the rural desert; he was a stray Tom who obviously had had a rough life. He looked like a Gus and that's what we named him. After maybe five years a coyote killed Gus and I grieved for three years. I had been very attached to my cat family. Other cats included Inca, a Persian my spouse retrieved from the pound after Gus passed, Lyra, a cat my spouse found in the Intel parking lot. I gave Lyra to a fellow student in law school. During the final exam in Torts, I asked her about Lyra and she said the cat got run over. That really affected my test taking that day. I felt terrible. There was also Tara, a Siamese long hair that a friend's mother dropped off with us because she couldn't take care of it. Lucky was a cat I brought to Maricopa from the Yacht House B&B in Florida (where I spent two years during my divorce from Don). I called him Lucky because he was another beat up Tom. But that was after NHW. Still, it's my story of cats. Now I have two, but they are really my second spouse's cats. I have become more of a dog person in later life, that is, a Doberman person. But on NHW, cats were everything to me.

This poem is the story of how I entertained my cats. I set seed outside the picture window of the front room so the house finches could amuse my family of cats. The first stanza describes the saguaro we planted in our front yard. The nightingale is an allusion. We don't have such a bird in Phoenix but its name is beautiful, its song is wonderful, and the moment that stretched across the room lit my imagination with beautiful possibilities. That's what happens when you pause for a moment and allow poetry to fill your thoughts. The second stanza is descriptive. In the third stanza I say "the moment wears no clothes" which means that when we pause for a moment, anything is possible in the mind. Imagination. Magic. Mysticism. "No clothes" means the mind is free to create its own clothing, its own world.



In my earliest youth

In my earliest youth
I did many a harmful thing
Now upheld unreal and afar.

I was another person then—though No—
The threads of me are not severed.
I am a multi-colored tapestry—
Warp and waft of fine wear:
Silver threads, aqua-blue, and green,
Bright red, and yellow,
(Black and gray there too)
Woven to design a life
We hope is far from over.

We like the knitted weave—all of it—
The harm to the self, unreal
Drunken naive promiscuity
Of the times, of youth,
Woven tight in unbroken warp.

I like my earliest youth.
They are not mistakes.
They are a finely woven ware that will
Cover me in tapestry when I am one day dead.

(Meaning and comments 3-20-2022): This morning I relocated this poem and added it to this collection. I found it in one of my three trunks in a notebook. The search for it was short, to my relief. It was where I thought it might be, although I thought I might have to spend a long time searching through dozens of notebooks and books. Lucky me. I wrote a poem at the YH

about finding my “gems” meaning the poems I wrote and lost. Anyway, I’m not really sure when I wrote this poem. A few years ago, I found it somewhere among my things and was surprised. Didn’t remember I had written it. In truth, I really don’t remember writing any poems after my stay at the YH. And this sounds like a NHW poem before my relationship with my current spouse. I’m so glad I re-located this little gem.

This poem indicates that I’m quite a bit older than my late teens and early twenties when I set out in life and did daring things (traveled to Europe, joined the Army). At NHW I wasn’t that old. I was in my thirties and early forties. So, does this mean I was writing about myself ten or fifteen years before? It seems like I’d be in my fifties at least. Nevertheless, I include it in my NHW collection.

Certainly, the poet isn’t regretting what she did when she ventured forth from childhood, even if some of the things she did might cause harm in later years. Physical harm from drinking, from freely having unprotected sex, from trying some illicit drugs. The youthful experimentation and venturing forth only adds to the colorful total picture of the poet’s life. If she had done nothing venturesome, perhaps her life would lack depth, warp and waft. It would be a boring existence without exploring avenues beyond the confines of her heritage. But wrong behaviors, harmful behaviors, didn’t endure throughout her life. They existed only in her earliest youth. Then, presumably, she became aware of the benefits of not engaging perpetually in harmful ways.

(This is a side note, not related to the poem but related to the day I re-found it and I wanted to jot this down. A few weeks ago, my spouse brought home two little tortoises which I’ve been taking care of in my altar room. I thought all was well, they seemed in good health, but shortly after I wrote about this poem I went into my room and they were out of their box. At first,

I assumed they had escaped but then I discovered that my Doberman Red had helped himself to both of them. I think one has survived but I'm not sure about the other one. It put a real damper on my good feelings for the day. I'm very sympathetic about animals. However, people do eat turtle soup. My spouse is in PHX now and I asked if he could bring me another turtle. I felt bad and didn't want him to jump into his accusations and blame rampage against me. He didn't and said he could probably get me another turtle.)

Harry, Tarry, Parry and Sally Forth

Harry was a little boy
Who ravaged all he got,
And Tarry lingered all the while
Hoping never to get caught.
Parry was a clever lad,
Avoiding Harry's fist
While Sally jumped in leaps and bounds
For just one Tarry kiss.

(Meaning and comments 3-15-2022): This poem has an interesting story. It popped into my head one day while on NHW. It's one of my word play poems, that's all. But the story involves my first spouse Don. The thing about our marriage is that we weren't very engaged or deeply involved with each other. It's as if we were just playing along at life, being a married couple. For example, he would never play the piano or clarinet for me, as I requested him to do several times, and he never read my poetry. If we had done those things, we might have become closer in spirit. But we didn't and we weren't close in heart and spirit. Maybe intellectually we had some common ground because he was a smart guy, a Stanford and Berkley engineer at Intel, and I was a person interested in many things (still am). That day I came up with this poem, I did share it with Don and he said something like, "Oh, that's clever" or "Oh, how witty." This is the only poem I ever shared with him except for the following poem "I am a little aspect" which I in fact wrote up in calligraphy and gave to him shortly before our divorce. He later told me, while I

was at the YH B&B and we were divorcing, that he kept that poem and thought it was clever or witty or some such thing. Our divorce ended badly and Don fell into blaming me for all the financial ills that came his way. He challenged me at court, several times, trying to prove he was justified in not paying me any alimony and so on. It had been an ugly ordeal that left him looking rather foolish because the court awarded me what was just. I wonder if he kept that “little aspect” poem. Probably not. I’m sure his Chinese wife would’ve destroyed it because when Don first married her, while I was at the YH and early on in our divorce, he said he could no longer associate with me. He had to pull out of his financial interests in the YH because his new internet bride suggested that he can’t be in business with me because, as an ex-wife, I might take an axe and chop his head off.

A Little Aspect

I am a little aspect
(from aspiration grew)
and what they wouldn’t tell me,
already that I knew.
No longer doesn’t matter –
(for matter is a cause)
and aspects are created
by a temporary pause.

(The following version I gave to my first husband):

I am a little aspect
From aspiration grew
And by the way I know that
Already that you knew.
It really doesn’t matter
For matter is a cause
And aspects are created
By a temporary pause.

(Meaning and comments 3-15-2022): This is mostly a word play poem and too much analysis would destroy its simplicity. It seems Buddhist to me in that we human beings already

possess a Buddha nature, enlightenment, wisdom—"Already that I knew." "Temporary pause" means taking time to realize our true nature and clear away all the delusions imposed on our minds from the social and familial world. "Matter is a cause" has to do with cause and effect. Karma. Realizing our karmic nature? Enough about this poem. Obviously the second version was directed at my first spouse. (In my collection of poetry Family Secrets, I offer another interpretation.)

Where Inspiration Takes Me

I go where inspiration takes me,
That is where I walk,
Flowers, shrubs, and trees
Along the side,
For them,
Do I not talk?

(Meaning and comments 3-15-2022): A self-explanatory ditty. The natural world around me, more than the human social and familial drivel, inspires my creative mind.

The Moon was there for me (written while I was working on my memoir "Moonbeams in Asia")

The moon was there for me
Though I sometimes concocted
My own illusions.
Despite its presence,
Even in its greatest brilliance,
The moon waited
With relentless patience,
As though,
Just for me.

Three Ditties

The Mornings are for people blind.
In as much as you can see,
So shall you be wise.

To silence angry farmers go,
To where unearthly flowers grow
And on their way to heaven climb

By way of their own furrows find.

How does it come by?
For whom is it lodged?
Take a walk along an
Empty street at night—
You may discover
Who you are.

Our Goal in Life (9-26-87)

Our goal in life
Is perfectibility.
That is why,
No matter how or when,
We fall short.
Still, we pick up
And continue going,
There is no reason to stop –
Unless we stop ourselves.

Certainly, we can't
Meet all the aims of life.
That is why there's eternity
Which is perfectibility.
When do we reach our end?

The Torch of Freedom (after the Tiananmen Square massacre. Six years after I had lived in China. "She" is the statue of liberty.)

She lifts high the torch of freedom—
Of people
longing to know and speak the truth.
I want to cry for the young of a country shamefully old.
For a youth who surrendered life
For their heartfelt cause . . .
And here then come the soldiers to destroy
Children who
Let out the fire
In a country grown too old.



The Superstitions (written at the Superstition Mountains with my parents and first husband.)

Shadows play against the old
Brown rock, deeply creviced
Standing tall, like
Fingers holding the blue sky.

Here,
Legends wind around each cove,
For a Dutchman lost his mine.

Something Beyond Constancy (9-7-1990)

I'd like to kill myself, for a while—
you know – for a day or two,
A month, perhaps,
But not permanently
No, no. Not that.
And this deal called
Reincarnation won't suffice.
No, no. Not that
I want to return as me
the same self-person of now today,
Not some other entity who
Must learn all over again.
No, no. Not that.
I sort of like me.
Although not everything about living
Constantly.

This is why I prefer to kill
Myself for a while.
Set me aside on a shelf,
For later,
For when I feel ready
To tackle “constantly” once more –
That unfettered force

that won't let up.
That manner of routine,
And of foul things, OK things, good things—
Of wondering what love
Really is.
And if I "do it right"
Or why, if I don't,
Of hoping for something better,
Something beyond constancy.

If I had the chance
to do it,
I'd kill myself,
but only for a day or two.
I just couldn't do it otherwise,
Most likely because,
I don't mind trying to love,
And I can't stop hoping
for something beyond
the drab dull boredom
of that straight and narrow
Constancy.

Dream Words

I awake
Into the beyond
Along my memory.
(I go a little farther down the stream)
(there must be melodies that work.)
(the pain must have subsided.)

OK,
I am going to see
What I can get done
In one swift toil.
Then train to what I have:
Another league down the river.

Awake!
And strengthen all that you feel –
Pure and simple sounds
When happiness is pulled innate.
I awake!

These are actually words popping out of my head upon awakening a few different mornings. “My happiness is pulled innate” are dream words I uttered shortly after moving to Night Hawk Way.

Ramsey Canyon (I wrote this during a writing retreat for my novel “The Man from Sacaton.”)

Why do we venture into Nature
Then awe and gawk at its beauty?
We are a part of it,
After all.

As I sit within it (Nature),
On a hillside overlooking
Ramsey Canyon,
I should feel at home,
That this is commonplace,
An extension of me,
I of it.

And I rarely
awe and gawk
At myself.

(Meaning and comments 3-15-2022): During my ten years on NHW I spent most of my time on different projects, many of which my spouse and I started together and left unfinished: “In a Word, To Be Absurd” was our attempt to create a word play journal. I put a lot of myself into it but my spouse petered out and we dropped it. Here is a feature I intended to put in our journal, a favorite quote from a favorite author:

Quotes of Authors

Human beings never think for themselves, they find it too uncomfortable. For the most part, members of our species simply repeat what they are told – and become upset if they are exposed to any different view. The characteristic human trait is not awareness but conformity, and the characteristic result is religious warfare. Other animals fight for territory or food; but, uniquely in the animal kingdom, human beings fight for their "beliefs." The reason is that beliefs guide behavior, which has evolutionary importance among human beings. But at a time when our behavior may well lead us to extinction, I see no reason to assume we have any awareness at all. We are stubborn, self-destructive conformists. Any other view of our species is just a self-congratulatory delusion. (Michael Crichton, "The Lost World")

I also worked on two memoirs: “Moonbeams in Asia,” about my sojourn teaching English in China, Thailand, and Kuwait, and “The Trouble with Brass,” about my military stint in the Army; and I began writing novels starting with “Ten Years Past Cairo” which was based on my travels in Europe out of HS, then I drafted “Dreams along the Upside-down River,” “Guardian of the Maya Tree,” “My Brave Inca Dove,” and “The Man from Sacaton” (while I was in law school). During these years I liked taking writing retreats into natural settings to be alone with my thoughts and inspired by the surroundings. I went to Aravaipa Canyon, Greer, a ranch in Wickenburg where I drafted “Dreams” and I went to Ramsey Canyon in southern Arizona three different times. On one of these trips, I wrote this poem which seems self-explanatory, and one time, instead of working on a novel I wrote the three essays included in this collection: Enormously Together, Disciplined Creativity, and Ignored In-between.

During these retreats, I took walks to absorb the setting. On my last retreat to Ramsey Canyon, I got lost far away from my cabin. I wandered for hours looking for my way back and feeling very pressed for time. I didn’t want to miss the checkout time and I was eager to get back home, a four-hour drive, because this was during a very stressful time for me and my spouse. Don had received an Intel CAP rating, the lowest ranking among his fellow employees. CAP stands for Corrective Action Plan (required) and my spouse and I feared he would lose his job, our security, our source of income. We had decided it was time to make a move. Perhaps I drove this because I wanted to live in the rural desert and we felt that we needed to look for property before he actually lost his job and we couldn’t get a mortgage. So, I was anxious to get back home and meet with realtors, or to tell Don about my desire to move to the rural desert. I wandered and wandered until I spotted a utility truck and two linemen doing some kind of work. I felt a bit vulnerable, a lone woman, two lone men in the wilderness, but I dared to approach

them and say I was lost. They were nice and pointed me in the right direction. I wrote the story about Don and I moving to the rural desert in my third memoir “The Desert’s Edge.”

(Comments 3-15-2022): My first spouse and I stayed married thirteen years and spent about ten of those years on NHW. I don’t have any interest in exploring the dimensions of that marriage. It ended over twenty-two years ago and I don’t feel like talking about my ex, Don Ellis. But the marriage was part of my earlier life and it involved the years on NHW so I feel obliged to at least offer a cursory overview of that relationship and how it might have impacted my poetry and essays. My essay “Enormously Together” is about that relationship and sheds light on the way I was thinking at this time.

I met Don when I was working on my Master’s degree in English in 1980. I wanted to use my degree to travel the world, to live and work in foreign lands, and to have adventures beyond PDX, my hometown. I was interested in other cultures, other countries, people of different backgrounds and at the time I was dating a man from India named Shiv Balakrishnan. I met him through a colleague teaching English at PCC Ross Island Center. Shiv was at a volleyball get together with a bunch of co-op vegetarian hippie type young people. I was very drawn to this man from India because India was high on my list of places I wanted to see and experience. At the time, I was renting a room at my brother’s house during the only time my brother and I had any kind of relationship or contact. I rented the bedroom for fifty dollars a month and I agreed to the arrangement because I didn’t want to live with my parents but I need to save money for my upcoming travels. Perhaps I wanted to try and have some kind of relationship with my brother after not talking to him for most of my life. I was about 26. Anyway, I did help Shiv lose his virginity in that bedroom one night which caused all kinds of mental complications for him because he was returning to India for an arranged marriage. That aside, Shiv worked at Intel and

was friends with Don. They were both electrical engineers. Shiv took me to an Intel party at a Pakistani colleague's apartment. When he met me, Don felt like I should be with him and not this foreign Indian guy. We had talked and he liked me. Don had a good sense of humor and cracked lots of jokes. "I grew up with Mt. St. Helens," I remarked because the mountain had recently erupted and everyone else at the party was not from PDX. "You must have come from a large house," Don joked. Anyway, he learned that I had season tickets to the symphony and he went to the next concert, found me during the intermission, got my number, took me out a few times, arranged for me to write my thesis on UNIX at Intel, and did all he could to promote our relationship/friendship despite Shiv. Getting my number at the sympathy was a story he loved telling people. But I'm sure that little gem got trashed into bad karma after our ugly divorce.

When I set off for China on my first teaching job, Don was just one of my many male friends. Nothing was going to keep me from my adventures and from fleeing Portland, Oregon. A few of these male friends had been lovers: John Johnson, Lars, Francois, a few not, Greg Ellars and Don. He was too reserved to approach me about sex. But we were good friends and wrote each other during my three years in Asia. The truth is, my experience in Thailand had been such a "culture shock" that near the end of my teaching contract I wrote Don a letter and ended it by asking him if he wanted to get married. I felt like he was a good stable choice who could offer me calmness after a chaotic time. And besides, my mom adored Don. He was the only guy she ever said anything about to me. In her own words she said something like he's a good catch. While I was in Asia, Mom had even invited Don to her house to show him pictures I had sent home. I'm sure I weighed my parents' approval into my decision to ask Don if he wanted to marry. His reply simply said, "It's a question worthy of consideration." I also wrote a poem about that query. It's included in my collection of poems from Thailand but I submit it here:

Sweet little letter, query sent from me

Sweet little letter –
(Query sent from me)
Please – reach your destination,
Miles across the sea.

And when he starts to read you,
Subtle, try to be –
But force a good decision
Appropriate for me.

And if he doesn't care to
(and you fail in your quest) –
then try to look unwanted
and at your very best.

But if he should agree to
Affirmation's call,
Pretend you're not a letter
Of misery at all.

I came back to PDX and avoided returning to my parents' house by moving into Don's apartment, into my own bedroom. We had no sexual relationship. He was simply too shy or too polite or too something and it wasn't something I was interested in pushing. I liked the set up. However, I got a job offer from Kuwait University and felt eager to go. I didn't like working temporary jobs as a file clerk, for one thing, and KU offered me a substantial salary with housing and other benefits. But after only one semester, Kuwait didn't work out for me. The story of my entire Asian escapade is in my memoir "Moonbeams in Asia." I returned to PDX, to Don and convinced him we should move to the east coast. He took a job at GTE in the Boston area and for a year, I enjoyed the setting. But we had no sexual relationship for the same reasons I've already given. He didn't push it and I didn't either. Although one time he said he was hoping I would be Mrs. Robinson, i.e., teach him all about sex and that completely turned me off. There's nothing wrong with me. I've just never been a lustful person.

While in Boston, I attempted to go to law school, at Don's suggestion. I also taught English at the YMCA and a private language academy called Language Consultants. I wrote part of this story in my novel "The Man from Sacaton." Before I attend New England School of Law, Don got fed up with Boston traffic and took a job in Chandler, AZ at Intel. I stayed with him and set aside going to law school. It's a story I tell in my latest memoir "Law School High."

We stayed in an apartment in Chandler maybe a year, and in '87 got married at Chandler Christian Church. I was religious at the time and wanted a Christian wedding although I did suggest we get married before a large saguaro. But he wanted a traditional wedding. It was quite small. Our parents, my best pal Kathi, my sister, another friend, Clairine and her mom and daughter Mariah and one Intel friend of Don's named Layton. My parents greatly approved of Don but didn't want to pay for my wedding probably because I was too old at 31 and Don came from a fairly wealthy family.

Shortly after that we found a new home in the Ahwatukee subdivision on NHW. We did our own landscaping and I thoroughly enjoyed the home and yard. It was a nice place for my parents to visit on their trips to sunny Arizona, before they retired and settled into a RV resort in Bullhead City which is across the Colorado River from the casinos of Laughlin. My parents enjoyed gambling.

I wrote the following poem while I was in Guatemala studying Spanish and writing my first draft to "Guardian of the Maya Tree." I was evidently missing Don. That's about all I have to say regarding its meaning. It's far from my favorite poem probably because of who it's about.

In the Room Empty

In the room empty.
You are there –
I, here – alone.
Clock ticking,

voices, traffic
Of a foreign town
A place so far away
So close, because I am here
And you are there –
Alone.

Our togetherness I draw upon,
To fill this empty room,
To stall the sound of time,
To still the alien voices not so far from
Where I sit –
Un-tampered by everyone,
Except the longing of my heart.

Togetherness brings to me,
That which is wholly present,
Wholly sound and good – a gracious,
Gift between wanderers
Who have questioned everything
But their own solitude –
For that can never be doubted.

I sit alone.
I am so awkward here,
So frail,
So, all alone.



Amateur Astronomy

Like cats, gardening, traveling, and writing, amateur astronomy was one of my hobbies and pursuits while on NHW. My interest in astronomy began when I took astronomy courses at PSU. As a class project I created paintings of the Pleiades, a solar eclipse, and the Andromeda Galaxy. While living on NHW, I often took my Schmidt Cassegrain to Picacho Peak for an

evening of stargazing all by myself. I also took a few photographs using my telescope: of lunar eclipses, of the Hale-Bopp comet, and of the different phases of the moon. I took solar eclipse photos during a trip to the Galapagos in 1998. And I also wrote a few poems about my appreciation for the world of outer space. The following is an essay I wrote for a website I had while at NHW:

Amateur Astronomy is a pursuit for the scientific mind. It is not a hobby where you sit comfortably in an armchair and read about science. It is a field-study hobby where enthusiasts grind the lenses for the telescopes they build to use with digital cameras (once called CCDs) or videos connected to computers, while under the stars of night. Amateur astronomers discover comets, count the number of meteors passing a grid during meteor showers, and travel across the world to witness solar eclipses. In astronomy, the word amateur is a very respected name.

I took my first college course in astronomy in 1978 from Professor Walton, who unfortunately died before my second year in his course. Professor Walton was a great astronomy teacher. He first had our class map out the constellations so we could find deep sky objects and recognize the planets when we began our field study. We took several trips to Larch Mountain, near Portland and one camping trip to Bend Oregon, to stargaze all night. During one outing we went to Goldendale Observatory in Washington State, off the Columbia River. At 3 am I watched Jupiter, Venus, Mars and maybe even Saturn rise from the darkness. One by one bright yellow, red, and golden orange points of static light appeared on the horizon, where the sun would rise in hours to come. As I watched each planet appear, I felt a surge of childlike excitement. Perhaps it was that very night that I became a committed amateur astronomer.

In 1985-6, I was fortunate enough to live in the Boston area. I enjoyed the serenity of Waldon's Pond, the intrigue of Harvard, Salem, and Cape Cod, and I joined the Amateur

Telescope Makers of Boston—a top notch astronomy club with members who write and work for Sky and Telescope—Dennis di Cicco, Stephen James O’Meara and E. Talmadge Mentall (who was president of ATMB when I was a member).

The highlight of that year was my appearance on a Nova episode about Halley’s Comet. With the Nova camera crew, I joined the club members on the roof of the Harvard-Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics. The night was chilly and we could barely see the famous comet that summoned the birth of Mark Twain as well as his death. If you see this video, I’m bundled in a green down jacket, no hat, and I never looked at the camera because I wanted to be on the final cut. I kept peering up and pointing at the sky, as if seeing the comet.

While I lived in Phoenix I joined both the Phoenix Astronomy Club and the Saguaro Astronomy Club. Science fiction writer Pete Manly was also a member of SAC and he was a member of my writing critique group. Several times author and comet hunter David Levy of “Shoemaker-Levy Comet 9” fame (the comet that crashed into Jupiter) spoke at the SAC meetings. Once he gave a wonderful talk about Mars while playing the song, “Lady in Red.” I always think of gazing at Mars when I hear that song.

Twice, I went to the Riverside Telescope Makers Conference where I heard Clyde Tombaugh, discoverer of Pluto, give one of his last talks. I’ve made several trips to observatories including Kitt Peak, Lowell, Goldendale, Mount Wilson, Palomar, the VLA in Socorro, Lick, and the National Naval Observatory in Washington, DC. I’ve spotted 55 Messier objects and traveled to see the solar eclipses in Mexico (1991) and in the Galapagos (1998). I stayed up all night watching Red Eye to Uranus. When I am a stargazer, I am a quiet observer of the night, living in the moment, at peace without worry. I am overjoyed by beauty, mystery, and discovery.



My photography and artwork

In the World of Outer Space

While gazing into night
 And seeing with averted vision
 the Andromeda Galaxy,
 Our sister city in outer space,
 I cannot help but think
 “it must be”
 that others exist like me —
 gazers of the night—
 seeing with reflection, awe, amazement
 Our dark and speckled home.

Andromeda, M 31 —
 Our sister casts faint light in my averted eyes.
 But what of her neighbors next door,
 Nearby, down the street, across town?
 Are they spying on me
 wondering who I am? Whether I exist?

For me,
 God is but my reverence
 For the all-mighty world of space,
 For the myriad stars at night,
 Treasures of my eternal sight.



A Mystical Experience (while everyone else happily snores).

The hour before the Warrior-Hunter
 arrives with his dogs
 Mars sits in the belly of Twins.
 The Warrior-Hunter, an hour before.

So slow.
Long wait.
It takes time, for sure,
As if to test me,
As if just for me —

Silhouetted Mittens
Pink, white, gray, blue
Are Expanding,
Reaching for the Warrior-Hunter.

I feel awake!
Ready!
(they all sleep but me).
I have the new day
Challenge at my feet
And the Warrior-Hunter
High overhead.

I am greeting this
Day at its doorstep.
Watching alone
The lifting of her shroud.
Peaceful,
I feel
(though a lot of people rumbling, I hear)

Like breath
Her soft silken diaphanous veil
Sweeps against my skin,
These sacred
Garments have been trimmed for me
Alone.

A slow dance now
Only for those who greet
The Warrior-Hunter
At the threshold
Of an autumn dawn.
I want this morning's promises
To invigorate my spirit
Uplift me,
And cast away the chafe.

I wrote this poem in 1994, during a trip to Monument Valley with Law School friends Kim and George. I was up at 3:30 am to watch the sun rise behind the mittens. I took plenty of pictures.



I wrote the following poem while living on NHW. It pertains to my childhood and I provide commentary in my collection of poems titled “Family Secrets.”

In my pocket there are carried

In my pocket
There are carried
Small and scattered
Worn and tattered
Bones, tiny bones
Of sources forgotten
Of vanquished concern.

At times
One can feel small and forgotten
Amid the variety of life
Concerned.
For what, I wonder.
Who holds the frailty of my tender soul?
But me.
How far can I stretch? For how long?
Perhaps I do know,
For in my pocket there are carried
Bones to feel, shapes and textures to hold
But not to see or show.
Revealing would be a revelation,
A revolution –
A renovation of the soul. . .

And on occasion
I feel warm and vanquished,
As though time plays tricks

On she who dares
To flutter and to scatter
Seeds
in a rock-filled garden.

The effort is to grow –
To simply stretch and grow
The warmth of nature's
Un-captured soul.

The storm will come
And the weeds will blossom
Hardily amid the rock.
While in my pocket
I will carry
That, which cannot subside
For otherwise
who would mourn
The fallen hummingbird
In my garden
Of concern,
If not for me?
And who will forever carry
Inside pockets
Frail and fragile
Tiny bones.



What Color Last She Saw?

I wonder—
what color last she saw,
on that day
Violence tore her heart away.

Imagine:
A color stew,

Alone,
Last she saw—
Without hue,
Without tone.
What color last she saw?

Did color echo?
Did color speak?
When violence tore your heart away?

“Beware
the colors of this Earth,”
I hear her say to me.
“Lie low
At the crossing of birth and of death,
the color last we see.”

This is a poem I wrote about my friend Betsy Urquhart who died in a car crash soon after I left Boston 1986. We had had a falling out which made her sudden death even more tragic for me. Betsy had called me to say how “un-right” I was. For example, at a restaurant I had ordered for my boyfriend Don and then moved to a better table. She went on and on about such little incidents that she didn’t like and after she hung up, I predicted that the next time I heard about her would be in an obituary. A year later, my mom called and said she read the obituary of my friend. The ending verse “crossing of birth and death” came to me while I was driving. I pulled over and wrote down the poem. I also wrote an essay “A Year of Pain Remembered” about how her lambasting of me and her shocking death affected me for nearly a year.

Part II: Essays from Night Hawk Way:

A Year of Pain Remembered

An essay about my friend Betsy (rewritten 2018)

I first wrote this essay the year after my friend was killed in a car crash in Marlboro Massachusetts, December 1986, the year of the Challenger explosion. Betsy was only 29. Because I can’t find that article, I am rewriting it now.

Betsy was my friend. Even though she called me one night to tell me that I was a real piece of shit. During our ten years of friendship, Betsy once suggested she was going to take a picture of herself standing naked before a mirror each year for the rest of her life to record how her body changes (this was in the 1980's, well before smartphones and selfies). I agreed it was an intriguing idea. If she followed through with this plan for her posterity, she probably took only a single picture.

In the late 1970's, I met Betsy in my second-year French class at PSU. She was tall, 6' perhaps, and voluptuous. Smart. Betsy and I quickly became friends, able to laugh at many things. Because we were both brunette and had brown eyes, we were often mistaken for sisters.

We started having coffee after class, or a drink. When we walked along the streets of downtown Portland, near PSU, we'd make silly jokes such as, "We're right in the middle of the rue!" or we'd call the maître d at a French restaurant "le pitre" (clown). Our joking around was inane, sure, but we were young and amused by life. During one French class she was so impressed by my mnemonics to remember grammatical points for a test, she said, "I want to touch you and absorb your wit...." I felt close to her.

When I graduated with a BS in Anthropology, I spent a night celebrating with my gal pal Betsy, getting drunk on a jug of red wine. Really drunk. Somehow, we ended up with a handsome Iranian man who Betsy knew. In bed. In his campus dormitory. The Iranian man happily encouraged Betsy and I to sensually kiss, but that was all. The kiss meant nothing, just a drunken antic. A celebratory kiss. I threw up. She left me with the Iranian after he promised not to take advantage of me. He did.

About this time, Betsy traveled to Europe and Israel. My impressive friend even called me from London. (During her call, I noticed weevils in the oatmeal I was eating.) I made plans to

meet her in Europe, but never did. After she returned, she decided she didn't want to graduate from PSU and she applied to top US universities and Columbia accepted her application. I was unduly impressed with my French class friend. At the time, I was teaching English to Hmong and Mien refugees at Portland Community College and working on my MA in English at PSU.

Before Betsy went to Columbia University, she stayed at a cabin near Yreka, in Northern California with her brother and his wife, both lawyers, Pat and John Urquhart. The brother was trying his luck with an underground gold mine. For a weekend, I visited Betsy in the forest hills. We went skinny dipping in a stream and had drinks at a Yreka nightclub, in the middle of nowhere. I had to leave early Monday morning to get back to my classes. The evening before I left, Betsy suggested I thank her brother and his wife for their hospitality but I failed to do so and left at 5 am. This behavior on my part probably didn't sit well with Betsy.

While Betsy was going to Columbia, she had an apartment in NYC shared with two Korean students and a "wheeler-dealer" woman from Brooklyn. For two weeks, I visited Betsy in New York. While she was in class, I walked around the city then waited for her on the steps of Columbia's Low Memorial Library, a neoclassic monumental building built in 1895. Most memorable during this trip to NYC was our visit to the Windows of the World in the World Trade Tower. On the 107th floor restaurant, we had drinks that turned out to be expensive. So, in high school fashion, we "tennis-shoed" the Twin Tower bar and left without paying. Our daring "whim" of youth was 20 years before 9-11-01.

While I was in Asia teaching English, Betsy graduated from Columbia. I'm not sure what her major was but she once talked about garbology—dumpster diving as a science. When she died, her job was as a laboratory supervisor for Signal Environmental Systems.

Betsy happened to live in the Boston area when I returned to the US from Asia and hooked up with the man who became my first husband. Don and I moved to Boston and we often got together with Betsy. We went to restaurants, night clubs, and to the Renaissance Fair where Betsy got sick from a turkey leg. I thought we were enjoying one another's company. We even started making plans for a trip to Nepal. I was impressed with my Ivy League, successful friend.

Then she called me one evening and claimed to have a problem with me. For example, she said, in a Thai restaurant, I ordered for Don. It was something she found distasteful. "Variety is the spice of life," she said, meaning Don should take a chance and order on his own. She was bothered that I moved to another table in a restaurant, twice. Yes, I did. In one restaurant we were seated by the drafty door and I asked to move to another table. At a night club, Don, Betsy, her friends, and I sat at a corner table. The music was so loud no one could hold a conversation and I moved to a small table before the band to listen to the music. I thought I was being assertive, proactive, she thought I was rude.

Over the phone, Betsy then said something like, "Now is not your time to go to Nepal . . . you need to find your calling" or some such condescending rot. In other words, she wanted to pull out of our plans to travel to Nepal. At the time, I was teaching English at the Boston YMCA and living with Don in Natick (living off Don, she supposed, I suppose). I was not a hotshot like her. I had a PSU degree, not one from Columbia. I just wasn't cool. I was a dweeb who didn't sit well with her. But I don't want to put too many thoughts into the mind of a dead person.

Betsy even said she had talked to her sister and mother about me, about fearing a trip to Nepal with such a scatter-romp (my term). She ended the call suggesting she'd call back, but I knew she never would. Why had she even bothered calling me in the first place? Just to lambaste

me, run me over the coals? Just let it go; wait until I call you, then let slip your disgust with me. Anyway, I told myself the next time I hear about her will be in an obituary.

About a year after the unpleasant phone call, Mom sent me Betsy's Oregonian obituary of December 12, 1986. I read it then threw it in the dumpster at our Chandler, Arizona apartment, like it was a curse. I later went to dig it out but that was an impossible task.

I wrote a letter of sympathy to her parents. I included a Chinese proverb (which I can't find). In essence, the proverb says that if a person lives a life of accomplishment, adventure, fortitude and so on, she's lived a long-life no matter how long she's lived. I said that Betsy was such a person.

The year of pain remembered is the year I spent troubled by her death. Even the dreams I occasionally had about her, haunted me. On 10/21/90, I wrote down a dream I called, "Seer of the Night."

In that dream Betsy visits my New York apartment. "I thought you were dead," I say, standing at the door.

"That's only hearsay," she replies.

I invite her in and we sit at the kitchen table.

"I'm 38," she says.

I'm puzzled. In life she was younger than me and I'm 35. I ask her what happened and say, "God Betsy, I've spent a year feeling bad about you. I wrote your parents a sympathy card. They must hate me for stirring up a horrible notion."

The woman before me seems so odd; she has an aura about her. I fear her more than rejoice that she didn't die. I thought her death was a closure. Now the case reopens and she's alive. "What are you?" I ask.

“A Seer of the Night,” she replies. “I only see halfway. My family and friends are distant memories. Seers have no emotions. Our only drive is to exist. I’m 38, don’t you understand?”

“You aren’t 38!”

“Yes I am. What you see is Betsy in a dead soul’s body. I don’t even know her name. You can’t see her; you only see me. My essence. We who die in shock linger and seek a way to return to life. But we are only half aware. We seek the person in our last thought. The connector. You, Teri, are my connector. We Seers of the Night enter the body of a weak dying soul, of a vulnerable person, someone down and out whose soul is dying. We enter the soul as it dies. (The truth is, the Seer kills the soul). To outsiders it looks like the person we possess becomes ill, then demented, homeless etc. Teri, you were in my dying thoughts so I come to you. I don’t know why. I only half see. Half understand what I want and need.”

“But there must be others who were in your last thoughts before you were killed. Who are they?”

“I don’t know. I don’t even know my family. They can’t see me because they weren’t in my dying thoughts.”

“But what do you want from me? To make amends?”

“I’m not sure. I think I want to kill your soul. I don’t know. I want to know. Want to live. I don’t know what drives me to the place that sustains me.”

“What is this place that sustains you? Who runs it?”

“It’s a place run by an Outsider whose wife and three children died and became Seers of the Night. He is a powerful man who sustains Seers at a shelter for homeless souls. Before this powerful Outsider can help us, we Seers must die within a week of invading a dying soul’s body. This man is old now. He wants to become a Seer and rejoin his family. But no one can plan to be

a Seer because he must be taken by surprise. We Seers go to his Shelter to get what we need to live in the bodies we possess. But we know nothing about who runs this place. We only see those who are as we are. Those like us. We can't ask questions because we only have half a thought."

"Why half?"

"Half alive half dead. The soul we possess is not even sure if it exists."

"You scare me."

"Then I'll take you to this place."

"Outsiders can go?"

"I don't know. You are my connector. Perhaps you can go."

In the end, I run from Betsy believing the death of my soul is at stake.



In Our New Home

The boxes are unpacked, sundry possessions are in their place, and we're finally settled in our new home—the house we've been waiting for since last October. Reaching this destination wasn't as easy as we expected. No, there were a few snags along the way.

Our house is located in a part of Phoenix that is newly developed with parks and state-of-the-art houses—Arizona style. We're living south of Ahwatukee off Chandler Boulevard, west of Interstate 10, north of the Gila River Indian Reservation, and east of South Mountain Park, the

world's largest city park. At sunset, these western mountains become staunch silhouettes beneath wonderful crepuscular hues—a quiet yellow, a modest purple, and a subdued pink.

Actually, we were the first buyers to move into the Monte Vista subdivision of US Homes, which has its disadvantages. First of all, the post office won't deliver our mail to the neighborhood cluster box (no home delivery) until the subdivision has fifty percent occupancy. Consequently, we must pick up our mail in Ahwatukee. Another disadvantage is that construction subcontractors (or “subs” as they're called) begin working on the surrounding homes at five AM, waking us to the sound of hammers, saws, and rock and roll music.

I enjoy taking our sheltie for walks around the block where I can observe the steps involved in house construction. To begin the process, workers dig troughs in the caliche soil then set iron rods in the troughs to reinforce the concrete foundation. Next, the workers lay the pipes before pouring the concrete. When the foundation dries, the subs begin constructing the wooden frame. They bolt chicken wire on top as a backing for the stucco exterior. Concurrently, the men cover the rooves with plywood and tar paper in preparation for the Spanish tiles. While the two coats of gray stucco are applied, the variegated orange to red tiles are layered. At last subs paint the houses colors lifted straight from the South Mountain sunsets.

The Arizona Home

I like the characteristics of the Arizona home—stucco exteriors, tile rooves (a recent trend in the area), and the interior design for spaciousness. Our house has elevated ceilings in every room except the garage, hallway, spare bathroom, and laundry room; incidentally, our hallways are nearly five-feet wide.

Some of the typical features of these desert homes are rounded archways and high ledges between rooms. The decorative rafters are ideal for our three cats, as though they were designed

with cats in mind. People decorate them with silk plants and indigenous southwest Native American crafts (Hopi, Anasazi, Navajo, Ute, or Apache). It takes a long ladder to put anything on them. Speaking of which, some neighboring homes have an abundance of elevated windows (a real pane to reach and keep clean). Windows in the Arizona home are shrines to the plenteous desert sunshine.

In the Valley of the Sun, homebuyers must consider the solar path. The cats and I enjoy the bountiful morning sunshine that enters the dining room and sunken living room east of the front entry. Our house face south so the back patio stays shaded throughout the day. The roof covers this patio where French doors off the master bedroom, a sliding door off the Arizona room (family room), and a single door off the breakfast nook meet. The master bedroom has an additional set of French doors opening to the hallway.

One of our options was a double fireplace between the dining and living rooms. Surprisingly enough, fireplaces are popular in Arizona homes. Arizonans want to use them at least once a year when temperatures drop below forty. The Monte Vista model homes have fireplaces in every conceivable place—between the master bedroom and bath, in the living room, and of course in the Arizona room. An additional extravagance (one we didn't opt for) is the wet bar. One model has wet bars in the master bedroom, the den, living room, and Arizona room.

Included in our new house package was a generous landscaping certificate. We're currently creating a desert landscape in our front yard which involves careful selection and arrangement of plants suitable to the harsh climate. Our finished yard should entail a saguaro (that's sue'war-oh), and ocotillo (ock oh'tee yoh), three yuccas, two agaves, a few prickly pear cacti, some golden barrels, aloe vera, and sprays of fountain grass. We'll probably use brown

granite gravel as ground cover and drop some granite boulders around the plants. Against the house I've planted orange dwarf lantanas to offset the yellow sunset exterior.

A six-foot block wall surrounds the back yard and is a general feature of all the homes in our neighborhood. It's a small area although large enough for a swimming pool and convenient for our pets. Don plans to lay out grass sod because he wants a lawn even in the desert. Probably because he's from Chicago. I'm planning to plant a lime, lemon, and bottle brush tree, hibiscus shrubs, a few palm trees, and magenta bougainvillea against the back wall.

Encountering Pests

Shortly after moving into our new home, we discovered Dartling beetles everywhere. We hastily invited over Ken from Aardvark Exterminators, an older man who has known his bugs for thirty years. After he finished spraying inside and outside the house, he shared some of his vermin anecdotes with me.

He explained that there are two species of scorpions inhabiting the desert southwest: Centruroides and the Giant Desert Hairy Scorpion. They range in size from a quarter inch to six inches long. The smaller reddish scorpion, Centruroides (sentra'roideez), has venom potentially lethal to people. Nevertheless, Mr. Aardvark asserted that they aren't aggressive and attack only when provoked. He warned me that if one ever happened to land on me I should carefully allow it to crawl off. I wonder whether I have that sort of patience.

The legendary Black Widow spider also dwells in this region. A passive creature as well, the Black Widow shies away from human habitations and subdivisions. She likes dry wood piles and outdoor faucets where she can build her web beside convenient drinking water.

The nastiest vermin Mr. Aardvark recounted was the Brown Recluse spider. Even the name reverberates in my head. These arachnids also nest in dry wood, abandoned litter, and

around dirt roads. Unlike the Widow or Centruroides, the Brown Recluse's bite is not immediately detected. Mr. Aardvark used the analogy of radiation and said the victim's body tissue festers from the inside out until it's checked by the proper antidote.

"But don't trouble yourself," Mr. Aardvark reassured me. "These kinds of vermin aren't usually around residential areas. And as soon as the construction eases up, your beetle problem will go away."

I thanked the Aardvark guy and invited him to return in a month.

The saga of buying our new home

Our tumultuous house buying saga began when my husband and I discovered the model home we'd been searching for. After turning over the earnest money, we selected a "spec" home on a corner lot. Generally, builders construct a few spec homes in new subdivisions to bolster the selling process. They then build the remaining homes after a customer signs the real estate sales agreement.

Our spec home was only a wooden frame when we signed the first contract. This gave us the chance to select linoleum patterns and the colors for our cabinets, carpet, exterior paint, and the ceramic entry tile. It was too late to select the front façade elevation but I liked the existing one anyway—a gable over the garage, two square recessed windows, and a towering arch over the entryway.

As we watched the house take shape, several auspicious events occurred. A few weeks after we signed the first contract, the interest rate for my VA loan dropped from nine and a half to nine percent. Then, after we returned from our Christmas holiday in Las Vegas, the builder decreased the base price of the house by eight thousand dollars to sell more homes more quickly. With pleasure we wrote new contracts for each profitable change. Believing we had the financial

leeway, we even added a refrigerator, a washer and dryer, and a 2-1 builder's buy down to our mortgage. A buy down is a builder's option to help borderline buyers squeeze into a new home. This was our first house purchase so it seems we needed the boost. If for example, the closing rate is at nine percent interest, payments the first year are at 7%, the second year at 8%, and at 9% the third year through the remaining twenty-eight years of payments. Our own eventual triumph came from adding a 3-2-1 buy down to our mortgage.

The builder was eager to have us close, for tax advantages, by the end of December. The house was ready but more work had to be done on our loan application. To our astonishment the process was returned to the beginning one day because the woman working on it unexpectedly quit her job. As it turned out, a bit of luck came from this annoying delay when interest rates dropped another half percent.

A few mistakes along the way

I admit we made a few mistakes while buying our first home. I place part of the blame on our zealous salesman Mr. Barker. At first Barker continually told us that we'd be in the house as soon as it was finished. After it was, he began saying, "We'll have you inside that house by this weekend . . . by this Friday . . . by next week . . ."

Our first mistake was to turn in a thirty-day notice at our apartment before the loan was approved. We decided to gamble because our lease was up in February and we were led to believe we'd be in the house by January. If the management found new renters, we'd get back our deposit.

Mr. Barker, in his usual vigor, kept reassuring us that we'd close in time and if we didn't he'd get us in the house on some sort of temporary rental agreement. As it turned out, our loan wasn't ready when the time arrived for us to vacate the apartment. The gamble had backfired.

The landlord found new renters and no other apartments were available in our complex and we couldn't get into the house on this temporary rental agreement our salesman had so generously proposed. Consequently, we put the cats in a kennel, returned the dog to its mother, and moved practically everything we owned into storage.

By Tuesday that week, nothing had yet transpired. While we waited in the manacles of uncertainty, the ominous loan was sent to mortgage headquarters in Texas. We checked into the Tempe Mission Palms near ASU, counting the luxury hotel stay as a vacation of sorts. Over several days, while hotel expenses added up incredibly fast, we heard nothing about the loan. We checked out of the Palms and were entirely homeless until we checked into the less expensive Aloha Motel on Arizona Avenue later that night. I was developing a distressing empathy for the homeless.

At 4 PM Friday, we walked back into Mr. Barker's office prepared for the closing transaction. He looked concerned but said with assurance that we would have to "re-group." The loan hadn't gone through because the ratio was too high. (Now why couldn't this mortgage company figure that out in the first place instead of wasting our time and money?)

Barker added that our situation was routine: 50% of the contracts submitted to US Home Mortgage are rejected, however, 90% of those are approved at the "phase two" mortgage company. He explained that the people at Waterfield Mortgage (phase two) are more eager to pass the loans through because they work on commission.

"Why then didn't you use phase two to begin with?" I asked.

"It's a matter of policy to submit new contracts to US Home Mortgage first," he explained. Then he asserted, "Look folks, I guarantee we'll get you in that house."

By this time, I was weary of such mindless reassurance. If he had only told us from the beginning that the loan process might take forever, we could have avoided a lot of anxiety and financial hardship. Anyway, at this dismal point we signed our fifth real estate sales agreement without the refrigerator, washer, and dryer.

That same day we made our second major mistake by signing another six-month apartment lease because apartment complexes close to Don's work offered nothing less. No month-to-month leases. And without a place to call home we felt trapped. Besides, we were beginning to doubt whether we'd ever be approved for a loan.

As it turned out, the loan once again wasn't approved. Left with only a modicum of hope, we signed our sixth and final contract adding the 3-2-1 buy down. Naturally Barker told us we'd be in the house by the following week. Unfortunately, by this point the time limit on all the previous credit checks had expired forcing Waterfield Mortgage to recheck our entire credit line, prolonging our agony several more weeks.

Finally, in our new home

One day I received a most unexpected phone call, "Your loan's been approved," came the voice on the line.

I hardly reacted. "Well, what more do we have to do?" I asked, not convinced the ordeal could possibly be over.

"Nothing. You'll probably close tomorrow."

We couldn't believe it was happening until we signed all those myriad papers. Even then, we worried some other snag would suddenly appear. And one did—the apartment. We thought that forfeiting our deposit was compensation enough for breaking the lease. But we were in Arizona, not Massachusetts, and to our surprise we were bound to the payments until the end of

the six months. If we “skipped-out” the management threatened to send a credit agency after us, take us to small claims court, and garnish Don’s salary. What a mess. Fortunately, we solved this slight complication through a friend who was in a position to kindly take over the lease.

Settling into a new home takes a while, I might add. The first of many tasks was to cover the windows. And shopping for blinds is not the most exciting way to spend a sunny weekend. We also had hookups and services to arrange—electricity, water, cable, phone, garbage, newspaper, and pest control. There were homeowner and appliance manuals to read.

We still have much decorating to do, the landscaping to finish, and a few more rooms to furnish. And, as I am discovering, we have plenty of odds and ends to buy—paint brushes, a ladder, garden tools, a lawn mower—the kind of stuff parents always seemed to have around the house.

Yes, we have reached our destination and at long last we can claim to be homeowners. Now, the tumults along the way are merely a yarn to spin into the fabric of our new home.

Grubs in my Garden

My husband and I recently bought a new house in Phoenix, Arizona. Included in our house package was a one-thousand-dollar landscaping certificate which can add up to a lot of plants if you choose to create your own landscaping and plant everything yourself.

This was my first experience with planting and growing living things. In the beginning, the task looked enormous because only a few types of plants grow in the harsh desert climate and hard caliche soil. Our first of many tasks was to develop a plan. We decided that a desert landscape in front would be attractive and easy to manage.

The only plant my husband really wanted was a saguaro, especially one with arms. But at twenty dollars a foot, I convinced him that we should use the certificate money for more than one

or two plants. We agreed on a five-foot armless saguaro. The man at the nursery assured us that it would grow arms in five years.

Before we began planting we had eight tons of sod dumped in our front yard. I was astonished at how little eight tons of sod actually amounted to on top of 2000 square feet. But it turned out to be adequate and gave me a new perspective on dimensions.

Planting the saguaro was such a chore that we had a saguaro planting dinner party with one of my husband's burlier friends. After dinner, we dug a hole in the designated saguaro mound then, with ropes, a garbage can lid, and an empty cat litter box, the two men raised the mighty desert leviathan into the hole while I quickly tried to bury its shallow roots. It reminded me of the ancient Egyptians raising one of their obelisks.

The remaining plants in the front yard weren't such an arduous event to plant. But with each plant we had to consider its relationship to the sun. Some plants can't take reflected sunlight—such as against the house, and other plants need partial shade under the intense Arizona sun.

Because my husband got his saguaro, he suggested that I select the remaining plants. For the desert look, I decided on an octopus agave, an ocotillo, an old man cactus, a few golden barrel cacti, some aloes, and three varieties of yuccas—a gloriosa, a Spanish bayonet, and a pendulous. I arranged these plants on three mounds along with a few sprays of fountain grass which does best with plenty of water.

Against our house I planted a few orange lantanas and oleander bushes. These cheery plants are in the front because they have poisonous droppings that would harm our pets that freely roam the backyard. Our final arrangement seems successful, however, knowing when and how much to water what is remarkably puzzling.

I was excited that some tropical plants were compatible with the desert climate. My favorite is the bougainvillea which I first encountered when I traveled to Saipan in the early 1980's. I planted twenty of them along the back block wall. In less than a month, only five of the original twenty had survived. There were two reasons for this. First of all, my husband and I were not convinced that it was important to carefully cut the container from the plant and gently set it into a properly dug hole without upsetting the root ball. We thought it would work just as well if we carefully slid the plant from its container. We were wrong. The other harbinger of demise for the poor fifteen bougainvillea was the puppy we brought into our new house. At first, we were letting him run freely in the walled-in back yard. Unfortunately, the bougainvillea that survived our planting technique weren't protected from the puppy. By the time the puppy brought its third bougainvillea to my backdoor stoop, it became, exclusively, my husband's dog.

Since the training of the dog wasn't working fast enough, we tied it to the back patio. But this meant I couldn't keep my potted plants within its reach. Finally, we found the perfect solution by constructing a kennel at the narrow side of the house where we will never plant anything. I told my husband that if we bought more bougainvillea and planted them correctly, I'd feel much happier about his dog. We did so and our new plants are thriving, as they should. I'm happy, my husband's satisfied, and his dog is ecstatic if I merely look at it.

One of the most expensive failures we had was with a bottlebrush tree which I selected because I fondly remembered them growing around the ponds on the university where I worked in Thailand. But the tree we bought from the nursery was too top-heavy with a long thin trunk. Almost immediately after the nursery dropped it off, my bottlebrush, still in its container, toppled over in a gust of wind. I was frantic to get it planted so it would stay upright. That weekend it

was standing lanky in the soil supported by three two-by-fours. By the following weekend, my tree was still standing but all of its leaves had turned brown.

I desperately called the nursery and was advised to dig a deep well around the trunk, fill it with ten gallons of water, and add the proper amount of Huma Gro and vitamin B complex. In spite of my efforts, the bottlebrush was already quite dead. Its demise was probably, again, because my husband had pulled it from its container instead of carefully cutting it out. A hard cold fact about plants, I've learned, is that some are just as sensitive as people can be.

Because it was May when I watched the bottlebrush die, a most spectacular tree was in full and fragrant bloom around Phoenix. It had lacy green leaves and was loaded with lovely purple trumpet flowers. I decided to replace the empty space left by the bottlebrush with a jacaranda which the nursery assured me was a much hardier tree. This time we planted it correctly and dug a deep watering well around it. But it will be another year before the purple trumpet flowers bloom.

I also selected fifteen-gallon lime and lemon trees, and a ten-gallon dwarf orange. Coming from the cold and wet Pacific NW, I was particularly thrilled to grow citrus trees and envisioned fresh lemonade every day and hot Indian lime pickles. The lemon tree grew almost a foot and a half in four months. It's the sort of hardy plant I like. However, the lime tree just sat there, not growing; and it started dropping leaves with each monsoon gust that swirled through our back yard.

The nursery recommended I apply a fist full of Plant Magic all Purpose Fertilizer. I decided to bolster all my trees and put a fist full around the water well of my jacaranda. A few days later I asked my husband, "Does my jacaranda look sick to you?"

As it turned out, I had given an overdose of the all-purpose fertilizer to the jacaranda and my dwarf orange tree. Both their leaves were drying out and dropping off. The nursery recommended that I flood them with water to dissipate the fertilizer. They assured me the plants would then pull through and I think they will.

I was puzzled by our bamboo and pampas grass. They both started going downhill the day we planted them. I gave them ample water (a relative term used in gardening guides) but eventually they both croaked, if plants croak. I can't even guess what happened to them.

The hardiest plants in my landscape are the palms—two queen palms and one fat little Mexican palm. We planted the queens by the back wall and the Mexican at the side wall not far from the lime and lemon trees. The oleanders and the hibiscus are also proving to be hardy plants but the hibiscus flower only lasts a day and then it shrivels up.

The lantanas in the front yard aren't as hardy as I expected. One afternoon I planted about fifteen yellow lantanas and the next morning they were all dead. This was mainly because I had fertilized them with diluted Hema Grow but the strong sunlight also played a part. The long hot season has arrived and I surmise that planting anything more until autumn would be a waste of time.

Our landscaping was basically finished except for the rock cover. The watering was our next enormous task. There simply was no time on the weekends for anything but housework and gardening—the shocking reality of new home ownership. I pleaded with my husband to find a solution for all the work involved in maintaining the landscape. The answer lie in our installing a drip system.

With the summer upon us, it was difficult to install and regulate the hoses and emitters. Then, once we finished the task, the problem was deciding how much water each plant required.

I read gardening guides, called nurseries, and experimented. Finally, I organized a watering schedule I think may work. For example, yuccas and agaves take water twice a week, the trees need deep water soaking three times a week, and in order for the bougainvillea to bloom, it can't be watered more than once a week.

Midsummer we got a truckload of prickly pear from a colleague of my husband. The man told us the cacti would grow wherever we threw it. This is not true. We planted a few of the painfully prickly cacti pods around the house. The ones planted in the range of the lawn sprinkler (my husband had to have a strip of green lawn in the backyard) kept green and eventually had new growth. The others turned yellow brown. We surmised that the cacti needed more water. After we watered the yellow brown pads they began to turn green and grow new pods. We had a similar learning experience with our golden barrels. The nursery told us they didn't take much water. But after they started imploding and turning yellow, I began watering them more and they are now plump and green.

At last, I thought I had the ordeal of gardening under control—the plants were planted, the drip system installed, the watering regulated. Then, a few weeks ago, I went out to deepen the wells around the plants, which I need to do about once a month because of water erosion, and while I was digging around one of my five original bougainvillea I discovered something most disturbing. I knew that what I encountered could be nothing other than grubs in my garden. These horrible white globs with black heads were devouring the roots of my bougainvillea. They were even at the roots of my orange lantanas. It was disgusting and I knew I wouldn't sleep well until we got rid of this nasty problem.

My husband returned home the following night with a bag of grub killer and an applicator. I was delighted. I shot the pesticide around my plants and watered them. That was a

week ago and I believe all the grubs are gone. However, they are persistent pests and difficult to get rid of because they are well insulated in their primeval environment. The nursery recommended applying the grub killer once a month.

We are leaving on our vacation next week which presents a new problem. At first I was quite worried that the watering arrangement I so meticulously worked out would get screwed up. And I couldn't impose my detailed schedule on our friend who had offered to drop by daily to make sure the watering was taking place. I've reached a point now, anyway: if a plant dies then it's just not hardy enough for our landscaped gardens.

I doubt that I will ever have a green thumb, not here in the desert. Besides, a person must thoroughly enjoy gardening for that. And in this harsh climate, I don't possess an abundance of enthusiasm. Nonetheless, I am pleased with our efforts at landscaping and the solutions to the problems we encountered. I would offer anyone interested in doing their own landscaping this advice: carefully consider what you are digging into.

Addendum to Grubs in my Garden (written 7-27-2023)

The oleanders: These hardy plants along the side of our house grew enormously in a year or two even without our watering them. I thought they looked nice with magenta flowers but it turned out that the roots were also shooting deep into the caliche soil. After about two years in our new house, my husband was away on a business trip when I had to face a backed-up toilet and sewage coming out of the sinks and bathtub, alone. I called a plumber and he suggested that the oleander roots had penetrated our sewage system. He cleared the pipes at quite a cost but I also had to call a nursery to yank out all the oleanders because the problem would simply return.

The five-foot saguaro: We lived in the house on Night Hawk Way for over ten years and the saguaro grew taller and plumper but it never produced any arms. However, I returned to the

house maybe after fifteen years and the saguaro was massive and had two perfectly “U” shaped arms shooting up from its sides. So, in other words, it took a bit longer than the five years the man at the nursery promised us.

The jacaranda: The jacaranda grew so huge after we moved from Night Hawk that it had to be cut down. It practically took up the entire yard and its roots were displacing the back slump block wall.

The Mexican palm: In less than five years the Mexican palm shot up into a fifty-foot pillar that looked out of place in our small backyard. I suspect that we had watered it too much.

The prickly pear: The prickly pear cacti that we planted in the front yard on the saguaro mound overwhelmed the front yard. The pads grew so fast and prodigiously that we had to take all of it out and toss them into the desert.

The lime and lemon trees: After three or four years, my wonderful little lime tree produced an abundant crop of limes. I was thrilled and anticipated freezing lime juice and making pickled Indian limes after I returned home from a two-week vacation to visit my in-laws staying at Lake Tahoe. However, when I returned, for some reason unbeknownst to me, the tree was completely dead and all the limes were black and unsalvageable. (We may have planted it too close to the lemon tree!) As for the lemon tree, it continued to grow and produce lemons until after I divorced my first husband and he moved back into the house on Night Hawk Way. Unfortunately, he simply would not water any of the plants and that was the end of the lemon tree and any of the other plants that required watering.

Enormously Together

(written while on a writing retreat at Ramsey Canyon)

I have observed throughout my life, although more so lately, that the norm for couples is to be enormously together. Maybe it's not the norm but it appears common enough to me. And I suppose I notice it more than most because I'm not from the school of living enormously together. My school is individuality within harmonious togetherness and as a married woman, I am especially under scrutiny for not following the status quo of being enormously together. I am a nonconformist, after all.

What do I mean by being enormously together? It's not only how I observe couples interacting but it's what they say, sometimes slips that they aren't even aware are impacting my analytical mind. In general, being a couple has a long tradition of being a unit, a one. This has problems in that we aren't a unit because if we were, there shouldn't be any arguments, disagreements, and divorce. I rarely argue with myself, or if I chastise myself for something I did or said, I never argue back. Therefore, within myself, I am a whole. My companion, my spouse, is my partner in life. We share many goals, ideals, values, but we don't share one brain. He has his will and I have mine. And, again, as a married woman, traditionally, my individuality becomes lost in his and this causes me to become especially aggressive when it comes to maintaining my sense of individuality. He is proud of his individuality, as are most men, so why wouldn't I feel the same way? But what I am now writing delves into gender discrimination and I really want to discuss the coupling of individuals. And I'm not talking about fornicating.

Let's take my parents and grandparents as examples. They live and have always lived enormously together. They are always engaged in activities together; they never travel separately; they go to bed at the same time. But it's more than this. And it most often stems from the most private place, the bed. For example, when staying in a hotel room with two double beds, most couples would never consider sleeping separately, even though he snores or takes up most

of the bed. The other day when my parents, Don and I were staying at a hotel in Sante Fe, in two different rooms, my mother told me that she got up at six in the morning to use the bathroom and when she returned to bed, my father was taking up all the space so she couldn't go back to sleep. I noticed that the other double bed in my parents' room hadn't been touched. So why hadn't my mom crawled into the other bed, I asked myself, perplexed. But I said nothing. Perhaps my mom never even considered sleeping in a separate bed. Now, that's enormously together.

I mean, I have to kick my spouse out of the bedroom sometimes when he snores so I can get some sleep. Well, I know of some women who use earplugs. Why must we be so together all the time? Are we afraid of being alone? Despite the crass disturbance of a man's snoring? Or is it so ingrained in our minds, from acculturation, that we must always be together in the same bed no matter what. I truly believe many couples are like this. So, what's going on?

Another couple I know, good friends who are my age, live enormously together even though they occasionally travel separately. The woman told me about these cabins she and her husband had stayed at in southern Arizona. She said the cabins were rustic but adequate and that there were two single beds in the bedroom. "So, we slid them together," she added as if it was the most natural thing to do. For me, I had to wonder why it was so important that the two single beds became a double so the couple could sleep enormously together for the three nights. In my mind, if it's a matter of sex, well that's one thing, have sex in one bed, cuddle a while, then get in the separate beds and go to sleep. (And she is the friend who wears earplugs because of her husband's snoring).

I live in a world of coupling that I find somewhat cumbersome and odd. Because I'm a nonconformist. Most likely friends and family immediately assess my spouse and I as odd when they visit our hotel room in the morning and see that both double beds have been slept in. "Oh

my God!” are they thinking. “Aren’t these people together? Don’t they have sex then sleep entirely entwined?” Or maybe no one thinks anything about it, although I tend to doubt this. I believe the American mindset of couples is to be enormously together.

Couples see themselves as a physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental unit. This is too intense, especially in a society that praises individuality. Social inculcation aside, there exists in the American psyche a standard for being a couple. Now why should I care or even comment on this intensity in coupling? Why not simply say, let everyone, or every couple, do their own thing? There’s a lot of truth to this and I would agree and not even comment, but I have to wonder whether this trend of living with such intensity as a couple doesn’t lead to the eventual separation of the couple or at least to a lot of discord.

Animals in nature, I believe, do not live with such intensity. And neither do all human societies throughout history. But it exists now and in our American culture. It’s seen as romantic, as how couples should be. Sex is favored as the “raison d’etre,” especially great sex. Maybe this is part of the trend, but I don’t think so.

Anyway, I do believe that being too entwined and involved with someone else is not healthy. There needs to be healthy individuality, a separation, so that each member of the couple can be objective and helpful rather than expecting so much from the other one. Perhaps then divorce would be less of a trend. If we view the other as a partner through life and don’t fall into the enormity syndrome, maybe there’s a chance of finding fulfillment in the relationship for many long years.

Separate bedrooms might not be such a bad idea. Other cultures do it. It wasn’t uncommon in the past. And it wouldn’t mean the couple have an unhealthy relationship. No more than the living enormously together is healthy or unhealthy.

My prescription for being a couple is individualistic harmonious togetherness. I have my individuality, he has his. We are individuals married by law. We love and respect each other, but part of that love and respect is to understand our individual uniqueness as human beings. Not as a female or a male because that brings in too much social and religious conditioning that is really unfair to the female. That aside, I do not need to see myself as half complete and only whole because of him. If I were to fall into this, I would constantly expect more from him, attribute my dissatisfaction and disappointments to him and him alone. What a mess. Why should I put so much onto him? On my partner in life. I grew up. Am no longer a child. I no longer have a mother to dry my tears, nor does my spouse. He left his mother once and for all when he left home at eighteen. He cannot expect me to replace her. And he doesn't because he respects me more than the ideal of a wife inculcated in his mind. That socialized ideal that the man is head of the household and the wife is his vessel and servant who dutifully takes care of him, mothers him, and takes care of the house while he brings home the bacon. I digress, and we are no longer cave men and cave women where the husky man hunts mammoth and the woman bears his kids and keeps the hearth going. Blah blah blah.

No. My spouse and I are a modern world couple. We have grown together as individuals joined by a commitment to live together and provide a home base for each other. But this doesn't mean I am his caregiver or he is mine. We respect each other too much for that. We see each other as mature adults facing this difficult world with as much wisdom and courage as we can each summon. We are here for each other, to encourage, to listen, to make suggestions, and to offer love. But we are not here to serve the other and sacrifice our own self-worth, our own values and identity so that the other can reign supreme. I think I digress but it all relates.

To be a healthy couple, to have a happy satisfying marriage, and to stay together and live harmoniously, I believe you have to be divorced from each other, ironically. This is such a difficult concept to explain to the mindset adhering to the tradition of living and being enormously together. Maybe couples should take a close look at their behaviors and provide each other more room to be an individual, and became un-clung to the notion that being enormously together is romantic.

In my view, romance has its place. For me, it's a wholesome, mature love that happens when my spouse does something special for me, something he knows pleases me, the individual. He can't simply read from a book "How to be romantic to your wife." That would anger me. Instead, romantic endeavors have to be uniquely tied to the individual and it takes time to know the individual's likes and dislikes. That's why my version of romance involves maturity.

I'm glad to live in a relationship that's not so enormously together. I couldn't do it anyway without feeling smothered and snuffed out, being the individualist that I am. I'm happy to travel as I like, on writing retreats, to foreign countries, to have my own activities and interests, to be viewed as separate and unique from my spouse. I like that I'm involved in things he's unfamiliar with and can share my unique knowledge with him. I'm glad he has his own interests and pursuits outside of me. And I'm especially glad that we share our worlds with each other and that we hope for a future together while we learn to grow and appreciate our past together. We are not a one. We are not even soul-mates. But we are very much together in sharing and exploring the treasures and pains that the world presents. Sometimes I think that our marriage, after ten years now, will involve a lifetimes together.

The Childless Couple

(written while on a writing retreat at Ramsey Canyon)

The other night I went out with a friend to enjoy an Indian dinner. During the meal, my friend shared a dream she had. In it, a “childless couple” smothered a baby by drawing up plastic wrap over its head.

Should I be offended, I wondered, because my husband and I don’t have children. Well, yes, I’ve decided, and for several reasons. First of all, I find the term “childless couple” distasteful. It makes me feel out of sorts like my spouse and I are not “normal.” What’s wrong with us? Why are we a “childless couple.” In part it’s because I don’t like being categorized anyway although it’s something that happens to everyone, one way or another. I’m categorized as a woman, a white woman, a married white middle-class middle-aged woman entrepreneur writer with a law degree and so on. But I can deal with certain categorizations. Not with “the Childless Couple.” I felt almost like everyone in the restaurant stood, pointed at me, and muttered, “There, look at her—a barren woman.”

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not ashamed of not having had children. That’s almost beside the point. It’s just that the term “childless” is so heavily unflattering and, in fact, offensive. Are we incomplete? Because – less means less. Are we “less” than people who have given birth? Are we less than full people? Are we the couple less than them? “Why, they aren’t even a real family,” people might say. “They’re just a ‘childless couple.’” Don’t you see, it stings a bit.

My advice is for people not to label a couple childless. I mean really, it’s not even necessary to label others at all. And if we do, then maybe say why there’s Don and Teri, “people” and by the way, not that it’s pertinent to anything, but they never have had any children. They chose not to reproduce. To procreate. To sputter forth infants and further amass the globe. Or just say, “Why there they go. Teri there. And that’s Don over there, her spouse. No kids.”

Now to the dream. It was a shocker. A potent revelation of what's happening deep in the psyche of my "motherful" friend. Okay. She knows my spouse and I have no kids. And she tells the dream as if that weren't relevant. What if we were her black friends and her dream had been about a black person murdering a baby. Would she have so freely (and insensitively) made this little revelation at the table? I don't think so. But realistically, we are like her, superficially – white, middle aged, middle class—so there's no harm in telling. Oh, but there was.

You see, what happened was that my friend revealed to me that from the essence of her being she views us "less" people as the "takers of innocent life," because, maybe, we are not fruitful. Ouch! We "less" people smother babies, perhaps symbolically or perhaps surly we do. What's wrong with us?

This brings me to why this little saga stabbed my heart on a personal level. I view myself as a very conscientious and spiritual person. I chose, and my spouse chose (we are separate individuals, a divisible "couple") not to bring children into an over-populated world. We also have remarked and noted, through world travels and general observations, that this planet is way overpopulated with humans. So why add more. Especially if I and he don't think we could offer the child as much as a child deserves. In other words, we both have observed that too many children are brought into the world with very little thought. Then the parents (couples) are too busy with their own lives and self-interests and their children are neglected. What a shame. I firmly believe that if you chose to have children (and this doesn't even address the myriad who just get pregnant) devote yourself for the next twenty years to that project. Be an ideal parent (follow Bradshaw and a few leaders in family psychology). And don't be so busy that you have to fit the child into your schedule. So many do and, in my friend's psyche, even those that do are "more" than us "less" couples because they procreated.

Furthermore, on the subject of fruitfulness and fecundity, I am deeply spiritual and my spirituality lies in honoring the Earth and all the life of this world. My lifestyle incorporates this spiritual philosophy: I am vegan and do not eat or wear animal parts, I run a charitable organization that feeds impoverished families, I backpack into the wilderness at least monthly, I grow my own herbs and some vegetables, and I donate to nature preserves and environmental protection organization and I manage and host a website for an orphanage in Uganda. The point here isn't to ramble on about myself, but to defend my fruitfulness because society labels me in a denigrating way (as revealed through my friend's deepest thoughts about couples who don't pass on the genes).

Few can claim to be more giving back to the Earth, more respectful to life than I am. Is this not valued? And part of that respect may be to not bring forth more children. But I know all too well that much of society upholds and highly values motherhood, children, and parenting. If you haven't bought into this prominent trend, you are a nonconformist and we all know that nonconformists DON'T CONFORM. They're different. They challenge the status quo. Look beyond what is accepted; examine closely how people behave unquestioningly. And decide for themselves what is best. It hurts to realize that maybe what is best isn't what is accepted. So, we, the nonconformist, become one of the "less" people or some other label because, as we all know, everyone labels everyone else. Labels makes it easier to go through life unquestioningly. They make it easier to judge others. And judging others makes it easier to see ourselves as better, or, one of the "more" people.

Disciplined Creativity

(written while on a writing retreat at Ramsey Canyon)

The other day while some friends and I were forming a woman's group, one of my friends offered a "gem" during a discussion about meditation. We had a short meditation as part of the get together. During the discussion about meditating, my friend said she has a problem with the discipline of meditating because she believes in free-flowing creativity and sees any form of discipline as stifling her wonderful surge of creative energy.

This notion takes me back to a crazy friend I once had, years ago. He was a Frenchman who had lived in this country several years, was about fifty, and he wanted to be a writer in English. Actually, he had been a student of mine when I was teaching English at PSU and we started going out together. But anyway, Francoise (he was a cross-dresser who liked to go by the woman's version of his French name) wanted to write without any discipline, free from the constraints of grammar and rules. And so, he wrote several short, very passionate passages, I'm sure, and philosophical (he also wrote pornography). But what he wrote was confusing, convoluted, and difficult to follow. Was it too creative?

I'm not sure I'd classify it as that, but it was too free-flowing. Only Francoise could follow it, I'm sure. Only he could understand what he was trying to say and create. Consequently, his wonderful unbound prose became practically useless drivel to the rest of us. What good is that? Did he serve anyone by sharing his thoughts? Change anyone's perceptions, influence someone's thoughts and actions? Hardly. My strange yet fascinating and exciting friend only served himself. I don't think that was his goal. He wanted to speak his mind and influence others. Least of all, let others see and read his point of view. He probably did all right in porno.

And so, as with my friend's meditation comment the other night, I see a contradiction, a conflict in the minds of those who view themselves as ultra-creative shunners of discipline.

Anything created needs discipline. Foremost, how are you going to create without disciplining yourself to do so to begin with? Here I am, a creative person dedicated to creating novels, or other written pieces, such as this. I've had to discipline myself to write. To sit down, go on a writing retreat, and write—crank this puppy out! Otherwise, I would fall into the “Oh, I'm going to write this bestselling novel one day. . .” Talk without action. I'm not a pipe-dreamer. I am a creator and to create I must discipline myself.

I discipline myself to write in the first place. Then I must discipline my mind and organize my thoughts about what I want to say. Well, sure, much of what comes out of my mind and onto the keyboard is rather free flowing. My first drafts are generally like that, although I have put a lot of background thinking into the stories, outlined them somewhat, worked up some scenes for a dramatic purpose, but much of what I write is free flowing creativity. If that's what it is. There is some of this unbound wonder let loose on my creativity. But then comes the discipline. I must examine my work, understand what I'm actually communicating, understand what I want to say, explore the subtleties of what I do say, the workings of my subconscious mind.

To truly create something others can explore needs a lot of discipline, especially in writing. The finished draft, the published novel is a champion of discipline, otherwise all these wantabe writers, nearly everyone I know, would be published authors. I find the two harmoniously compatible—creativity and discipline. They are sisters hand in hand, working together to fabricate a lovely piece of art they wish to share. Without discipline, all my creations would still be inside my head, occasionally coming out in boasts during conversations. I love Madam Discipline as much as Ms. Creativity. The three of us make quite a quartet (the finished product being the fourth).

But then, I now wonder whether my women's group friend, a truly creative person in conversation, in interior decorating, in creating jewelry and art, was thinking less of the written word as creativity and more of her world of sculpture and so on. What does she mean by the remark that discipline stifles creativity? She said it in the context of meditation. But I think she imagined art pieces when she said it. If not, I'll address it anyway. If I were a painter, a creator of paintings, which I in fact would like to be as a hobbyist, I'd still need the discipline to pursue the craft. In fact, it seems I'm lacking the discipline these days to take up this hobby. But I'm not a talker about being an artist (as I am a writer); people tend to talk less about being a painter than about being a writer, I'm guessing. Yes, I do see that to be an artist, a painter, a craftsperson, I would need the same discipline that goes into writing. The discipline to create in the first place.

But what of the created object. Should the artist simply sit at the easel and create? Is there any discipline involved? Don't I need to experiment, know my materials, how this or that reacts with this or that? All discipline. Do I understand what kind of value my creation offers to the viewer? If it's nothing, just a jar lid with a few painted rocks and leaves glued to it, a haphazard piece I think ought to sell because I created it, then I may not influence or provoke anyone. And what's the point if my goal is to create in order to influence or provoke. Discipline would make all the difference. I recall another friend of mine, a man widowed and raising a child alone. He had created these drippings of some kind of metal material and tried to sell them at a craft fair, at the Portland Saturday Market. Nothing of his sold because, in my mind, his craft was undisciplined and haphazardly created without much spirit and thought toward their aesthetic or provocative value.

Now, I wonder, as I write this, whether fear or rejection of "discipline" isn't plain old laziness. Why shun such a helpful tool? Discipline means taking the time to do something, the

time to evaluate, critique, and create. It's not at odds with creativity, so I think this gem my friend shared is just that, a gem of talk, perhaps of justification not to do something she doesn't feel like doing. More so, this gem, rejection of discipline when it comes to creativity, is a habitual mindset learned from cultural influences that say, "be free oh ye creative one. Let not the discipline of the reasoned mind inhibit your powers." But there you are, by rejecting discipline in the first place, we stifle our ability to create for the benefit of others.

I create novels because I want to influence my readers. I want readers. I want to leave behind a legacy of thought put into a creative format that people can, hopefully, read, enjoy and maybe, if I may be so presumptuous, learn from. If I weren't the disciplined person I am, none of this would get done. I would fall into conformity, take a conformist job and only those immediately around me might hear my words and contemplate my thoughts. My goal is to create novels and I create them by being disciplined.

Now I wish to return to the context of this entire discussion, the impetus for this article. My friend's comment in relation to meditating—that meditating is a discipline and she believes that creativity is the greatest achievement so creativity is at odds with meditating because meditating is a disciplined art. You see, when meditating, thoughts enter our heads and we, according to certain schools of meditation, must let go of these thoughts, discipline our minds to achieve a sort of emptiness of thought. My friend's fear is that maybe a choice creative thought will enter her mind and then she'll have to discard it, thus inhibiting creativity. Well, in the discussion she said others have told her that meditation is a matter of choice. I told her, "you can choose the thoughts you want to keep," and that satisfied her somewhat.

And what is my view on meditation, creativity, and disciplined thought? First, I don't think meditation is for everyone, and that's fine. We're all so different in personal needs, in the

sort of stimulation that enhances our creativity or our lives in general. If the rigors of meditation don't match your needs, why torture yourself and agonize over whether or not to meditate? (and most probably, most people aren't meditating).

That is not to say that I don't think meditation could benefit everyone, it probably could. But those who benefit from the discipline, need not fear it'll inhibit the creative mind. And meditation is a discipline in that you must discipline yourself to take the time to settle into contemplative thought.

In my view, with all the chaos and confusion of the human world, a respite into meditation enhances my creativity and world view. It causes me to slow down and consider my actions and thoughts. Or simply rest in a natural world of tranquility and ease. After all, we dwell in a world where sometimes creativity and passion need to be tamed, at least momentarily. There needs to be some restraint on the undisciplined flow of imagination so that we can calmly return to our true nature, a nature of this Earth and not the constructions and constrictions of human institutions.

In conclusion, I would say to my friend, take the time to meditate and free yourself of this need to always be a creative passionate being. Slow down and appreciate the disciplined course of laying a foundation for your work, your life (unless of course you're a rock star). Appreciate your connectiveness to the Earth. Calm down. You cannot lose your energy through tranquility and peace. Enjoy the beauty of a peaceful mind at rest. Appreciate the power found after entering this quiet respite. And value the creativeness that returns to you tenfold after finding this area of peace held within the disciplined mind.

Ignored In-between

(written while on a writing retreat at Ramsey Canyon)

The other day I met with my parents on a trip to New Orleans. During one of many conversations, we talked about my niece, my mother's only granddaughter. My parents treasure their grandchild, especially because they don't have to be involved in the rigorous process of raising her. They shower her with gifts, rewards, and praises and incentives to get straight "A's." My mother tells me this as I sit there and she hasn't a clue that maybe, just maybe, I might feel a little ignored because as her child, she never rewarded, encouraged, or approved of me like she does her grandchild. I believe this is common for the "in-between generation."

After praising her granddaughter for being involved in a farming program through her school, my mother specifically said that Beth (her granddaughter) wants to be a veterinarian and my mother believed her wonderful granddaughter would actually become one, that it wasn't just a child's talk, that everyone would encourage the bright girl. Well, my dream as a child was to be a veterinarian. In fact, I told my mother this during high school, told my career counselor too. And he told me that my mother thought I might want to enter this program at the bank, starting as a bank teller. "But I want to be a veterinarian!" I remember telling the older stout balding counselor. He seemed almost shocked, as though that was something entirely different, not what my parents had discussed with him, not a bank teller's path. I don't remember what he said, but he didn't encourage me to pursue my dream. And I never forgot that disappointment. No one took me seriously and twenty-five years later, no one could love animals more than I do. And I know that this would have been a calling career for me. But I was discouraged, not encouraged.

So, at the table when my mother proudly told me that Beth wanted to be a veterinarian, I had to say, "Well, I wanted to be one when I was in high school. It wasn't a pipe dream!"

My mother backed off a bit. She abhors confrontation of any sort, and as a good daughter, I don't try to upset her anymore. I try to strike a balance between humoring my parents

who are becoming elderly, and voicing what I feel I should justly voice. I felt I did so, maybe I could have said more. But at least I said it. And I'll do so again if the occasion comes up.

I can understand that when parents become grandparents they are usually in a better position to be more encouraging and able to reward the grandchild monetarily. However, they should be careful with their own children, the ignored generation, especially in cases like mine, where my parents reward my sister's child. If it were my own children, maybe I'd feel differently, but I doubt it.

People grow insensitive to their own children, the ignored generation. I guess they feel that the child's grown now and shouldn't have childish feelings. Not true. Especially for anyone who has any sense of self-worth. I believe grandparents need to recognize this insensitivity as they boast about their grandchildren to their children. To the child who isn't the parent of that grandchild. At least honor and respect the ignored one. Show them that they are still as important as the grandchild.

A Period of Blindness

I was blind for two days, propelled into a world of dependence and vulnerability when leaving the haven of my home. Inside my house, I never felt completely helpless. In fact, I quickly realized how much the patterns and spaces of my home are deeply imbedded in my mind. I was able to find my way from room to room in darkness and with little trouble. Occasionally, I found myself in an uncertain space where I groped a while piecing together, in my mind, where I was actually standing.

The experience emphasized the extent my mind controls my actual perceptions, with or without sight. What is visual reinforces what's already in the mind, that is, after the mind has experienced the space and patterns. On one occasion I cooked some soup and found little trouble

moving around the kitchen because of its familiarity lodged in my mind. All its features, all the objects, and most of the spaces.

Problems arose when something lay out of place, when someone had set a plate under a bowl or moved a utensil to another drawer (and who doesn't get angry anyway when somebody's put something in the wrong place). The refrigerator presented difficulties because the objects there are generally jostled from place to place, so I had some more groping to do. I imagine that if I were blind for any length of time, everyone in the household would have to cooperate with me and keep all objects organized and in the places I select.

Amazingly, during my two days of blindness, I cooked two simple meals with little difficulty. I couldn't be sure of the mess I left behind, that was for my spouse to determine. But it felt good to be somewhat capable without my sight. Otherwise, there wasn't much for me to do. I couldn't read or watch videos. I listened to the radio and to music a while, made some phone calls, and napped a lot.

I tried practicing tai chi, the Chinese slow moving martial arts exercise. My equilibrium was off. Sight plays a large part on how I balance myself through the slow movements. However, I imagine that with time I would develop a new sense of balance despite sightlessness. In fact, I wonder if I began to practice the art with my eyes closed whether I would also develop this new sense of balance.

In relation to balance, when the doctor removed the patches and I headed out of the hospital, my sense of balance felt thrown off for a few hours. I got motion sickness on the way home from the hospital because I couldn't see the movement of the car.

The eye surgery that rendered me blind for two days involved the removal of pterygiums—growths on each eye that had plagued me for years. I didn't like their appearance

and they may have continued to grow, eventually blocking my vision. The time was right to have them removed.

The outpatient surgery went well, the nurses and doctor made me feel very comfortable. One nurse held my hand through the entire hour-long procedure. I was awake, although under a local anesthesia the entire time. “Scalpel,” the doctor had said. I saw him working on my eye, but it didn’t seem like my eye. Weird. “That does it,” he said at last and my consciousness rose from its stupor. Then the patches went on and I had no more sight for two days.

Really, venturing from the hospital presented the only time I felt truly helpless. I didn’t know how to move on my own. The pieces and spacings weren’t clearly in my mind. Don had to guide me to the exit and into the clamor of traffic noise, a Coke truck unloading, and distant construction booms. He helped me to the car then swerved me through the city.

I didn’t like feeling so helpless and vulnerable. I didn’t appreciate being talked to like a child, “Now here’s the elevator, take a step here . . .” It was obvious that my two-day experience lie far from what a truly blind person experiences. To enter their world would involve a much longer journey, a process of learning how to become capable, even independent without sight.

For me, my period of blindness demonstrated that determination and ingenuity unbinds our physical limits. But more so, I learned that in my mind there are places and spaces, perceptions, that I wouldn’t have known existed, except for my period of blindness.



Travel Essays

During my years on Night Hawk Way, I traveled both internationally and within the US. I took my parents on several trips to places they were interested seeing. We drove to Sante Fe and Taos, flew to New Orleans, and I wrote an essay about our trip to Washington DC. In 1991, just before I began law school, Don and I traveled to the ancient ruins of Mexico and saw the solar eclipse from Mexico City. While in law school, I spent my first summer break in Guatemala and Mesoamerica studying Spanish, traveling to the sites, and working on my novel “Guardian of the Maya Tree.” The following summer break I studied international law at Tel Aviv University, traveled throughout Egypt, and worked on my novel “Ten Years Past Cairo.” I wrote about that adventure in an editorial to the Mensa editor, which I include in this series of essays. After I graduated from ASU law, Don had a sabbatical from Indel and he and I travel for three months in Asia—from Vietnam and Bali to India, Nepal, and Tibet. Much of this adventure I relate in my novel “Key to 1000 Doors.” I include an essay about our Asia trip in this collection. My final trip with Don, while on NHW, was to South America where we hiked the Inca Trail and I worked on my novel “My Brave Inca Dove.” My essay about that adventure is also included in this collection. After that, Don and I moved to the rural desert and our marriage lasted about another year. During this time, I took my parents on a trip to the Galapagos to see the 1998 solar eclipse. That was my last international adventure.

A Vegetarian Amateur Astronomer Visits Washington D. C.



A curious title? Perhaps. But it covers interests ranging from a discriminating culinary style to a craze for viewing the most obscure and distant objects in the universe. Washington D. C. is the perfect city for anyone's peculiar habits and fascinations. It offers history, science, exotic art, High Culture, museums galore, politics prima donna, and eateries fantastic. Can a person relax on a trip to D. C.? I don't think so. If you're after a restful vacation—head for the Bahamas. A trip to the Capital involves sore feet, aching muscles, and a mind bedazzled by the wonders of a great nation and the world we live in.

Shortly after Labor Day, my husband, parents and I took a weeklong trip to the Capital. To organize the trip, we all decided on the places we wanted to see—Capital Hill, the White House, the Smithsonian, etc.—and then I ranked the sites according to our most pressing interests. As an amateur astronomer, the National Air and Space Museum stood at the top of my list, for my husband it was the National Museum of American History, and for my parents, who had never been to D. C., it was anything and everything that I thought might interest them. Of course, I resorted to much discretion when considering the places to see and the amount of walking involved. Fortunately, we all ended up satisfied with our vacation. And, as it turned out, a week seemed to be plenty of time mainly because at the end of it we were totally exhausted and ready to head home for some rest and for a chance to absorb the experience. However, if you want to see more sites than the mere basics, and if you have much stamina, I'd recommend at least two weeks.

About a month before we set out on our trip, I wrote to my congressman and requested tickets for VIP tours of the White House, Capital, Supreme Court, and the FBI headquarters. It's recommended you write at least a month in advance, but if you miss doing this, plenty of regular tours are scheduled throughout the week. In my opinion, the FBI headquarters was all right. It

interested my parents and it had a marvelous display of confiscated guns. At the Capital, I had trouble appreciating the dome painting by Brumidi, “The Apotheosis of Washington.” It’s a frieze of George Washington seated among clouds and angels. In the Museum of American History, a similar depiction of America’s first president sits half naked like the Greek god Zeus. You might say I have trouble viewing America’s founding fathers as a mythological God-like beings.

As far as the crowded White House tour, it would have been more impressive if our guide had spent less time talking about how the first ladies redecorated the mansion and more time telling us what famous people sat in some of those Monroe chairs. As a VAA (Vegetarian Amateur Astronomer), I wish to point out two presidents—John Quincy Adams and Theodore Roosevelt. Adams, America’s sixth president, gains kudos from me for his dedication to science, especially to astronomy. On the other hand, Teddy Roosevelt receives scads of demerits for being an avid big game hunter. In addition to animal skin rugs and furniture covers around his office, Teddy proudly displayed a rhinoceros-foot inkwell on his presidential desk. Need I say more?

The Supreme Court is housed in one of the most marvelous buildings on Capitol Hill. The tour was worth taking, but I wish our tour guide had told us less about the building’s marble or the allegorical sculptures in the Court Room and more about some of the major decisions the Court has made over the past two centuries. I mean, who really cares about a personified Wisdom, Peace, and Justice?

On our first day in D. C., my family and I took the Tourmobile around Arlington and the Mall—the park area that stretches several blocks from Capitol Hill to the Lincoln Memorial near the Potomac River. At a cost of eight dollars, you can spend the day from 9:30 to four in the

afternoon, hopping on and off the Tourmobile at each major memorial, Smithsonian museum, and political entity. To have an idea of the distances involved, I strongly recommend taking the Tourmobile as a first day overview of the sites.

We spent much of our first day viewing Arlington National Cemetery. Unfortunately, the Tourmobile doesn't pass the Iwo Jima War Memorial commending the Marine Corp of WWII. I saw this famous bronze statue on my first few trips to the Capital and, if possible, I urge any visitor to see it. To do so you can walk twenty minutes from the information house at the cemetery, where the Tourmobile drops you off, or take the Blue Line of Washington's clean and efficient Metro to the Arlington stop from where you walk a few blocks.

The highlights of Arlington Cemetery include the house of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and the grave of John F. Kennedy. Engraved on a wall at Kennedy's gravesite are some of my favorite words from his Inaugural Address: "Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans . . . Together let us explore the stars, conquer the deserts, eradicate disease, tap the ocean depths, and encourage the arts and commerce." Near the JFK gravesite is a solitary white cross on the grassy hillside marking the grave of Robert Kennedy.

At the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier rests four soldiers "Known But to God" from WWI, WWII, the Korean Conflict, and the Vietnam War. Every hour on the hour the U. S. Third Infantry, The Old Guard, changes its post. This event is worth watching if for nothing else than to see a youthful face mechanically march and salute the monument. Even the young guard's blinking seems regimented. Across the road from the war monument is an equally moving memorial to the crew of the Challenger space shuttle. Two of the seven Challenger astronauts, Dick Scobee and Michael Smith are buried in Arlington.

Hopping back on the Tourmobile from Arlington, my family and I crossed over the Potomac River to the Lincoln Memorial which is always crowded with tourists from around the world. Near the Lincoln Memorial stands the Vietnam Memorial, a black granite wall bounding a grassy hillside. For me, this was the most poignant sight in Washington, especially when I saw Vietnam Veterans standing at the wall remembering a fallen soldier.

To reach the Jefferson Memorial, I recommend walking in the cooling breeze around the Potomac Tidal Basin. The beautiful stroll invites you to rest under the shade of a Cherry tree and view the pond. My favorite Jeffersonian words on the walls of the monument were not “All men are created equal” because I can’t help but believe that at the time Jefferson wrote this, he meant All White landholding men—and not women or people of color. But Jefferson did write these inspiring and seemingly timeless words, “I am not an advocate for frequent changes in laws and constitutions, but laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths discovered and manners and opinions change, with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also to keep pace with the times.”

If you end up walking to the Jefferson Memorial on a weekday, stop by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing to learn facts about a dollar’s lifespan and to watch beautiful green ink squish as U. S. currency freshly comes off the press.

I didn’t go up Washington monument because I avoid crowding together in a single elevator with dozens of sweaty burly tourists. But my husband and parents went up to the top and claimed the view was worthwhile. However, everyone up there, as everywhere else in D. C. is out for a quick photo or camcorder shot and you have to continually make way for them. Ah yes,

the camera has become the meditative eye of this modern age. But if you stop for everyone snapping a picture, you'll be stopping all the time. Move on, I say.

For an introduction to the Smithsonian museums, I recommend first visiting the red brick Castle. Then take a rest in the Haupt Garden out the back doors of the Castle. The Smithsonian Institution has fifteen museums, including the National Zoo, and so it's imperative, especially if you only have a week, to choose the museums that interest you most. If you have time for nothing else, I recommend seeing, in this order, the National Air and Space Museum, the National Museum of American History, National Museum of Natural History, and the National Gallery of Art. By the way, if you're heading from the Art Gallery to the Natural History Museum, drop in the National Archives for a quick peak at the original parchment Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, and the Constitution. I found something marvelous about the technology of preserving the documents. Each is enclosed in a glass and bronze sealed case that contains helium gas and water vapor. It's a majestic union of the old with the new.

For the hardest amateur astronomer, science buff, or avid tourist, head for the Monday evening tour of the U. S. Naval Observatory. The tour starts at 8:30, but my husband and I began standing at the front gate at 7 o'clock since only 100 people are allowed on the tour and the tickets are given out first-come first-serve. The tour includes seeing the 26- and 12-inch telescopes and the clocks in the time service building. The Naval Observatory keeps the most precise time in the world by using atomic clocks that measure microwave resonance frequency (a little over 9 billion cycles per second). Two hydrogen MASER clocks (microwave amplification by stimulated emission of radiation) are also used at the observatory. The major purpose of the observatory is to determine time within one nanosecond (one billionth of a second per day). In a big city bogged down by nighttime light pollution, telescopes are of little use. The telescopes are

used mainly to determine the position of sun, moon, planets, a few select stars. However, as an historical note, the moons of Mars—Phobos and Deimos, were discovered through the 26-inch scope.

Don't miss the famous giant pandas at the National Zoo. Both Ling Ling and Hsing Hsing are vegetarian and at three in the afternoon they chow down on a meal of bamboo leaves. The rest of the zoo was impressive, as zoo's go, but as a vegetarian I found it a bit unappetizing when I stood behind the glass cage of the snapping turtle exhibit in the Reptile House. Suddenly, the feeder dumped a bucket of live baby rats into the water and the turtle gobbled them whole.

And what about nightlife in D. C.? Are you kidding? After a day of blisters begetting blisters, it's hard to do anything else. Our greatest nightlife event was a superb Shakespearean rendition of Richard III at the Folger Library starring Stacy Keach. "I thought there wouldn't be any actors left to finish the play," my father remarked. For anyone interested in fine art and High Culture, or simply an excellent performance, reserve your tickets at the Folger Theater well in advance.

Other than the "glorious" play, my husband and I spent our evenings enjoying a variety of outstanding vegetarian dinners. M Street and Wisconsin Avenue in Georgetown are great places to visit at night and along these two streets are dozens of restaurants offering Brazilian, Chinese, Thai, Italian, Vietnamese, Afghan, Indian, Latin, Mexican and good old American food. Another great place to find restaurants is on 18th Street a few blocks from the Woodly Park Zoo metro station. We ate at the Meskerem Ethiopian restaurant and marveled at the rich, spicy vegetarian platter—a culinary delight. We enjoyed our hot spicy dinner at Bombay Palace, near Farragut North metro station, and we found a great pizza restaurant, Julio's, near the Eastern Market

metro station. The Eastern Market area looks somewhat unsavory, but the pizza parlor is very near the metro station and the dishes are an excellent treat for any pizza lover.

Speaking of vegetarianism, I found the perfect place for lunch. Union Station has a storehouse of eateries and it's just off the metro station. While my husband ate pizza, and my parents found their deli sandwiches, I enjoyed Masala Dosas, a South Indian crepe that's rare to find in Indian restaurants. And it's a favorite of mine. Other treats at the Union Station include tempura at Ichiban, fresh ground coffee, shakes, fruits, nuts, candies, bagels, baked potatoes, pita bread sandwiches, and vegetarian noodles at the Rice Bowl. The Pavilion at the Old Post Office, near the Federal Triangle metro station, is another place for lunch. It offers a similar selection of fast-food restaurants and an area with marvelous gift shops. In fact, at one of the shops I bought a star chart shower curtain, if you can believe it! As far as the museum restaurants and cafeterias go, well, they're okay if you're not fussy about food. The best museum restaurant is in Air and Space.

A final note on vegetarianism, if you are one, be sure to prearrange with your airline, at least two days in advance, for a vegetarian meal. However, be forewarned! Don't expect a delicious substitute for the regular entrees. The airlines don't realize that being a vegetarian doesn't mean you lack taste buds. On the contrary, as a vegetarian I am highly particular about fine cuisine and delicious food.

In sum, Washington D. C. is not a place to relax. It's a place to learn and to appreciate the variable aspects of our nation and world—from science, politics, and art, to human and animal rights and dignity. A trip to the Capital offers a niche for a multitude of personalities—kids and adults alike. In fact, I found the city is so inspiring that I'm heading to law school to etch out a path toward congress, the senate, or maybe even the presidency. Why not? I may not become the

first amateur astronomer in white house, but I may be the first woman or perhaps the first to insist on vegetarian cuisine.

A Summer in Egypt, 1992

(A letter to the editor of MAAM, the Arizona publication for Mensa. For more about this travel story see my memoir “Law School High.”)



I spent this past summer in the Middle East by first flying to Cairo and meeting Lyn Stinnett, fellow Mensan and Arizonan. I retrieved her Egyptian address from an article she wrote in MAAM.

For six hours, Lyn and I rode camels around the Great Pyramids of Giza. Because of the recent terrorist threats in Egypt, hardly any other tourists were present. This made the experience especially great for me, but the Egyptians, who depend on the tourist industry for their livelihood, are really suffering.

Lyn invited me to spend a few days in Beni Suef where she's working at a clinic on an air force base (an American compound inside an Egyptian compound). It was a fantastic place to rest from jet-lag. Not only did I get my own room, Lyn provided me with my own house for a few nights.

Luxor offered splendid temples and ruins, but the touts—hustlers for taxis, camels, donkeys, hotels, and shops—made the experience somewhat trying. It became necessary at times

to hire a taxi, even though we wanted to walk to the sights, just to shed ourselves of the harassment.

The temple of Abu Simbel, near the Sudan boarder, was well worth the four-hour taxi ride through 120-degree heat. However, I would recommend going there early in the morning instead of at noon.

For the remainder of the summer, I studied international law at Tel Aviv university in Israel (through a Temple University summer program). It was a fantastic way to experience the heartthrob of the Middle East conflict, although I left wondering how the situation would ever reach any resolution—there are so many viewpoints, problems, angles, and differing peoples involved.

Because of my stay in Israel, I had to get two passports ahead of time so that I could travel to Jordan—a country that refuses to recognize Israel. I had no problem entering Jordan through the West Bank, but I could only get Jordanian money by negotiating with a taxi driver to take me to a bank in Amman. From there I went to the cliff-carved palaces of Petra—a remarkable site well worth a visit. To leave Jordan I ventured down to Egypt, via ferry, and back to Tel Aviv. Going to the West Bank from Jordan requires a permit from the Ministry of Interior, which could have taken more time than I had.

My trip to the Middle East was complete when I coincidentally encountered Lyn Stinnett in the Frankfurt airport while I awaited my flight home and she awaited her flight to a Mensan gathering in Berlin. We spent about an hour rehashing our respective summers and marveled at the serendipitous encounter.

Three Months in Asia



1995

This summer my husband and I extensively traveled throughout Asia. The journey came about because Don had earned his sabbatical from Intel and we wanted to see as much of the world for as little money as possible. Fortunately, traveling in Asia remains inexpensive, although not everywhere.

We started in Hong Kong, which, along with Singapore and Japan, ranks at the costly end of Asia. A cheap closet-size room in Kowloon runs 30 to 40 dollars. A room not much better cost us \$50 in Singapore.

In retrospect, a visit to Hong Kong may have been better at the end of our trip after venturing through countries that offered little in the way of conveniences. But we opted to begin in Hong Kong because of the cheaper flight.

From Hong Kong, we easily arranged an overnight boat trip up the Pearl River to Guangzhou, China. I taught English in China ten years ago and I found the differences striking. People dressed in modern, although polyester clothes rather than Navy blue Mao suits, or Army greens; and several fast-food restaurants had emerged. Now Motorcycle traffic rambled down the main roads along with the myriad bicycles and a few private cars. Previously, people were lucky to even own one of the “three things that go round”: a bicycle, a watch, and a sewing-machine. Now the Chinese were acquiring motorcycles, cars, boom-boxes, televisions, CDs, and cellular phones (which every other person on the streets of Hong Kong uses). What remained the same

was that very few people spoke English and Chinese hotels were still reluctant to house foreigners (the fear of reprisal syndrome). It'll be interesting to watch China take-over Hong Kong in 1997, although the contrast between Guangzhou and HK isn't as vast as it was ten years ago.

Vietnam, a highlight of our travels, is two hours by plane from Hong Kong. I had many expectations about our visit to the war-torn country headlined during my childhood. I imagined feeling tremendous sadness about the loss of lives, especially for the youthful American soldiers needlessly slaughtered. I thought I'd encounter much resentment toward Americans from the Vietnamese—for ripping apart their villages and causing the deaths of untold thousands of Vietnamese. Instead, I discovered a strikingly beautiful country of emerald mountains and ivory white beaches stretched along aqua blue surfs. Vietnam had been thriving in spite of America's closed trade policies. The people were kind, eager to speak English, and to show us the sights of their cities. One waiter at a cafe in Hue came up to our table and said, "I have tomorrow off. Can I show you around?" We agreed and the next day we rented bicycles and rode to pagodas, temples, and parks along the river.

From Hanoi we flew via Bangkok to Nepal. Unfortunately, we arrived during the monsoon season so we were pestered by rain and mosquitoes. In Pokhara, on our way to Varanasi, India, we caught glimpses of the majestic Annapurna range of the Himalayas, but only during the early morning hours. It felt like majestic gods were unveiling themselves to me, the devotee who awoke before sunrise.

In Varanasi we mostly walked along the ghats (stairwells to the holy Ganges) and watched the pilgrims bathe in the river while performing religious prayers and rites (puja). Unfortunately, we had difficulty walking around India because of the constant badgering by

street vendors (touts) or boys wanting to be our guides. The best solution was to simply hire a guide to fend off everyone else!

Back in Kathmandu, Nepal, we caught an overland tour and spent two incredible weeks in Tibet. The native Tibetans sang aloud on the streets and always smiled at us. They were, in fact, some of the friendliest people I've ever encountered. For most of the jeep ride across the tundra-like plateau I worried about altitude sickness. The first few days I drank gallons of water to help quell the effects of oxygen depletion (which presented the problem of frequent stops to urinate during the long drive across the bumpy dirt road). I also avoided exerting myself and I often took deep breaths, especially before falling asleep at night. My efforts paid off because I never experienced any symptoms of altitude sickness. Don claimed to have a headache for a few days along with feelings of nausea. In Tibet we saw lots of yaks, monasteries, and pilgrims circumambulating temples overwhelmingly scented with yak-butter candles. Buddhism seemed to thrive despite the Chinese occupation.

Flying from Lhasa back to Kathmandu offered us a heavenly panorama of the Himalayas. The pilot purposely circled Mount Everest as I snapped a roll of film while marveling at the sight. I have never experienced anything as awesome as viewing these snowcapped mountains looming above the clouds.

By the time we spent our last few weeks in Indonesia, we were both tired of the demands of making our own travel arrangements. Still, we saw several exotic temples, markets and monkey forests in Java and Bali. In Ubud, Bali, we watched the outstanding Ramayana ballet performed to the mystifying Balinese gamelan percussion (xylophone-like) instruments, and we saw legong dances with the dancers in colorful gold trimmed silk costumes. Bali is a beautiful tropical volcanic island that is unfortunately overrun with tourism. As in India, we had difficulty

strolling through town or along the beaches without hearing, “hey boss, need transport?” or “hey, you come to my shop. It number one. OK? You Promise!”

Along with the exotic and wonderful adventure of traveling comes the price of being the tourist. We are, after all, a resource of money for the native inhabitants. I guess it’s hard to blame anyone for trying to make a living, but, at the same time, it’s not easy to endure constant badgering, especially after two months.

All in all, we had a nearly perfect odyssey through Asia. We experienced no theft, major sicknesses, or loss of anything we were schlepping around. Also, everything we mailed home has arrived, although in somewhat tattered condition. Best of all, we made several new friends along the way and collected a vast array of antics and memories to relish and share for the rest of our lives.

Hiking The Inca Trail



1996

After spending Christmas in Cusco, my husband Don and I hiked thirty miles along the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu. For months we planned this hike, anticipating a week in the cool rarefied air of the world’s longest mountain range. We envisioned lush vegetation creeping over

stone-cut ruins, gentle llamas grazing in mountain meadows, and the Andean condor soaring among the snowcapped peaks.

Because of our limited time, we opted to join an organized trekking group. Such tour arrangements are easy to make in Peru. Travel agents approach you at every air or train station, offering their specially priced and convenient tours. Actually, we met a fairly nice agent in Cusco. Alberto Filipe chauffeured us to our hotel from the airport and arranged for our trek on the Inca trail, along with our train tickets to Lake Titicaca.

At the same time, Alberto assured us that the Inca Trail tour would consist of about 12 foreigners. Unfortunately, about 35 people from Israel, Germany, Denmark and other European countries joined our group. This surprise soared my blood pressure and by the end of the first day I desperately needed a flask of 100 proof. But we couldn't do much after our van—crammed full of travelers and unkempt porters with profuse body odor and cold sores—dropped us off at the trailhead, miles from any town or bus. We were stuck with the tour, but made the best of the situation and hired our own personal porter, for about twenty dollars, to carry our sleeping bags and knapsacks. The trekking company had their own porters to carry the tents, food and other supplies.

The thing was, I had grown so anxious about being packed together with so many people, that I began yelling at the porter we personally hired because he was adding equipment from the tour group to his pack. I felt we had hired him to carry our things, but it seemed the tour group simply added him to the rest of their porters. Anyway, I began yelling that he shouldn't take their equipment because Don, my husband, still carried his knapsack. Our tour guide, a short Peruvian man oddly named Teddy began yelling at me, "These people are a friendly people. You must

learn to be friendly,” as though I were this big foreign oaf – the ugly American. Well, with thirty-five people silently staring at me, I drew back, longing for that flask even more.

Two major difficulties during the hike, Teddy and rainy weather aside, were the meals and lack of toilet facilities. The tour organized meals for the group – vegetarian and omnivore – but what they offered rarely fit my strict vegan diet. So, this was more of a personal problem which I solved by carrying along my own loaf of whole wheat bread (purchased in Cusco from the Hare Krishna restaurant, Govinda), and Trader Joe’s trail mixes and dried fruits. Because of the cold rainy mornings, and scarcity of foliage near our camp, finding a secluded place for toilet use proved cumbersome. With thousands of people hiking the trail each year, this dismal problem will only increase unless the Peruvian government regulates the amount of people using the trail and provides sanitary facilities. Meanwhile, cemeteries and ruins serve as makeshift toilets.

On our first day we arrived at the trailhead by noon and reached camp at sunset. We hiked gradually uphill along the Rio Cusichara, a small stream gushing along a deep crevice. Along the way, we viewed distant glacial peaks and prickly pear cacti, purple wild flowers and scrub brush, similar to Arizona’s, stretching across the terrain. We also passed fields of potatoes and quinoa (a tiny aromatic grain native to the region), pastures where sheep grazed, grassy meadows, and thatched sod-brick farmhouses. At about sunset, after precariously crossing a crude and slippery log bridge, we reached our first night’s camp at the fork of the Llullucha and Cusichara rivers, in the village of Huayllabamba, at about 9000 feet in elevation.

The tour provided us with flimsy tents which barely withstood the night’s downpour. A lots of trekkers woke-up miserably grumpy after finding themselves drenched. For some reason, we were luckier and woke up merely damp.

Our camp spread across a tramped earth plaza near a barn-like shelter and huge garbage pit, just across from a cemetery edging the river valley. During the night, someone prowled around the tents and stole two bottles of water I'd purchased from a village kiosk. I had placed these bottles just outside the front door of our tent to make as much room as possible inside. (We had three people crammed in a two-person tent, another surprise.) After discovering my water was gone, I reasoned that either one of the trekkers desperately needed drinking water, or some enterprising villager found himself resale merchandise. In either case, I had read that thieves often prowl around the gringo camps, sometimes even slitting tents in search of valuables.

On the second day of the trek, my husband and I hired two scrawny pitiful horses from one of the villagers. We needed to reserve our energy during the long steep climb to Dead Woman's Pass, or Warmiwanusca. Along the four-hour climb, we spent an hour wandering through a cloud forest where bromeliads dotted the moss-covered trees – rather like a fantasy forest leading to a Wizard's castle.

Occasionally, my horse plodded up a narrow rocky portion of the trail that uncomfortably rimmed precipitous slopes. In places, the stream and trail merged and I had to dismount and clamber uphill. During these short climbs in the high altitude, each burdensome step took away my breath and pained my chest, as if something were pinching the air from me. Ideally, a person should spend two weeks acclimatizing before the trek, but that's rarely possible.

At the same time, most of the young Olympic trekkers in our group hiked up the pass without horses, which amazed me. And some of them even smoked when pausing along the trail. Makes you wonder.

A lot of gringos chewed coca leaves (cocaine is a derivative) or drank the coca tea (coca de mate) which the native Quechua people use for energy and to combat symptoms of high

altitude (nausea, headaches, shortness of breath). I did find the leaves energizing, somewhat like drinking a strong cup of double espresso after going off caffeine, or like chewing a betel nut (Indian pan).

For lunch, about an hour's climb before reaching Dead Woman's Pass, our group stopped beside the Llulluchayoc stream, which tumbled over lichenized rocks and a mossy clearing on its way toward Huayllabamba village. Behind the village loomed more beautiful and majestic snowcapped mountains enshrined in sheer mist. Fortunately, the sun peered out from beneath the clouds during our lunch break and porters hurriedly unfolded everyone's tents and sleeping bags to quickly dry.

Because of the rarefied atmosphere, it was necessary to smear large doses of sun block on all exposed skin, especially the lips and nose. Even my hairline part could easily burn, so a hat was essential.

The porters along the trail astonished me. Many were mere boys of about 16, though some were men who looked old but were probably younger than my forty years. They were short and stocky Quechua Indians, who spoke the ancient dialect of the Andes (one spoken by Inca nobility, rather like French was spoken in the English court after the Norman conquest). Using rope, they fastened tarp covered gear on their backs and actually sprinted along the trail, uphill or downhill. Many carried the load with a band around their foreheads, holding up the bottom with their hands. Most wore rubber sandals, possibly made from old tires; their toes and feet thickly callused and blackened. I never witnessed a porter stumble or move slowly along the trail. They were as sure footed as mountain goats, reaching our camps and lunch sites hours before the most durable trekker among us.

At last, we reached Warmiwanusca at 13,770 feet in elevation. This highest pass on the trail is named after a rock formations which, from a certain vantage point in the valley, resembles a reclined dead woman. (I never observed this.) From Warmiwanusca we viewed Rio Pacamayo or Sunrise River at the bottom of the steep mountain incline opposite Huayllabamba village. Above the river, we spotted our first ruins—Runturacay—and more incredible glacial peaks.

Before making the long descent to our camp, we had to leave our horses and their owners – a Quechua couple probably in their twenties who had hiked up to the pass leading the horses, along with their two boys of seven and nine, and two dogs who happily pranced along the entire way. The handsome and sturdy Quechua woman who led my horse, walked without any sign of breathlessness. She had long thick black braids joined together at the small of her back and she wore an alpaca sweater with a knee length fanned skirt and a felt bowler hat. Here and there, she and her husband, who led Don's horse, exchanged a few casual words in Quechua. No Spanish. I wondered what they were saying and gathered at a few points they were arguing. Before we left them, she asked me for a tip. I happily gave her ten dollars, her work seemed so strenuous. But I wished the money went to taking better care of the poor animals. Sure, I felt guilty about riding on that scrawny horse's back, but I sensed these creatures would be worse off if their owners weren't profiting from tourists.

From Dead Woman's Pass the actual Inca trail began, that is, the trail the ancient Incas built with stones carefully placed on the path (the Incas had a proclivity for placing stones so close together – it's amazing!). The steep descent strained my knees and by the time I reached our camp beside the Rio Pacamayo—in soggy black mud at the valley floor—I was more than ready for the ordeal to end. But we had three more days to go! Despite the rain, which lasted until the next morning, everyone eagerly washed up in the cool narrow stream that swept through

tall reeds and thick clumps of grass. Most trekkers used iodine tablets to purify their water, but wisely I had brought along a filter.

Early the next morning, through relentless downpour and wafts of musty smells, we slogged our way down a thick mud bank to some make-shift shelter where our tour group offered us popcorn for breakfast. We could not believe it. Several other tour groups were also hovering under this shelter. In fact, there were so many gringos in my group that I found myself amid another group, thinking it was my group until a rather rude French lady said, “You might ask first.” She referred to my helping myself to a cup of instant coffee. “You’re not in my group?” I asked, innocently and totally confused until some gallant young man standing by clued me in. “Just drink it,” he suggested about the coffee. I did, then wandered over to where Don was picking at a bowl of popcorn.

At this point, I realized that other groups were much better than ours. They provided their members with instant coffee and coca leaves to chew or they made them the coca de mate tea. And their groups were much smaller than ours, averaging about twelve foreigners.

The trail from Pacamayo river steeply ascended the mountain. Behind the oval-shaped ruins of Runturacay—where some trekkers had pitched tents—stood more snowcaps peering above a veil of clouds. We then had a three hour climb through fog banks to the second pass, along the way passing two glassy vaporizing lakes in a tundra like setting of moss, boulders and lichen. A tight sensation continued to burn in my chest, but I was solemnly rewarded on top of the 13,113-foot pass with another spectacular view of Cordillera Vilcabamba—staunch glacial peaks rising amid an ever-present wisp of clouds.

Further along the trail we spotted the next set of ruins, Sayacmarca or Dominant Town, perched on a narrow mountain ridge. A steep staircase led to these ruins, from where we slogged

up another bank to enjoy, while standing on shaky knees because there was no place to sit except in the thick mud, a pasta lunch along with some sweet fruit drink with odd things floating in it (a Quechua drink?).

From Dominant Town, the trail wound through an Inca tunnel, a narrow passage cut from hard granite cliffs, and continued down to Rio Aobambo and on to a slight climb reaching the third pass at 12,136 feet. Here we caught our first glimpse of the brown Urubamba river surging across the valley, bringing power to its inhabitants and mysticism to its visitors.

About three hours from Sayacmarca, we reached the ruins of Phuyupatamarca or Town Above the Clouds, at 11,972 feet. Phuyupatamarca featured a series of well-preserved Inca baths, where flowing water offered us a place to refresh after sweating for hours under thick plastic ponchos.

Hundreds of steps steeply descended Phuyupatamarca, too narrow in places for the smoking Olympian trekkers to scurry past (although we always made room for the porters once they set out on their rush down the trail, rather like making way for the mule team on a Grand Canyon hike).

In another hour, after an exhausting day, we finally reached the lengthy switch-back descent to a hostel and lodge built on the hillside, near massive powerlines from the Urubamba river. This part of the trail seemed almost as long as the rest of the day's hike in part because by now my legs ached from the difficult descents. At each corner of the zigzag, I continually spotted the hostel while noting that it seemed to grow more and more distant the further I descended.

To keep my filthy, sore and exhausted body going, I envisioned a comfortable room – or at least a dry bunk bed and a hot shower. (Actually, I pictured a Best Western room.) But as expected, the hostel had nothing available – the place was swarming with trekkers and porters. In

fact, another rude woman, this time an Aussi, asked, “What are you doing in here?” after I wandered into the woman’s dorm looking for the front office desk.

Fortunately, our porters had already set up the tents and I rested and rubbed my sore muscles before heading to the lodge for dinner. And, the lodge had a toilet that flushed, a treasure everyone relished after days of discomfort along the trail.

Before retiring to bed, Don and I passed up our tour group’s dinner and went to the lodge restaurant (a mess-hall like place teeming with inquisitive porters and smoking European trekkers enthusiastically discussing their adventure). Don and I wolfed down a few beers and feasted on a plate of oily fries, which I couldn’t finish so I gave what remained to a porter boy practically hovering over me like a vulture awaiting its turn at the carrion. That night, many trekkers opted to sleep on the dirty concrete floor of the lodge, presumably tired of their damp musty tents.

On day four of the hike, we headed across the valley floor to the Sun Gate or Intipunku, which marks the end of the Inca Trail. This point is both the last place trekkers are allowed to camp, and it offers the first glimpse of Machu Picchu—pillaring, mist enshrouded green peaks that flanked the ruins

Further down the trail past Intipunku we reached agricultural terraces where a lone brown llama, its long black lashes adorning large dark eyes, gracefully kneeled and grazed on the grass. We then climbed a long staircase up a hill just beside the ruins for another spectacular view of Machu Picchu. On this hill stood the Hut of the Caretaker of the Funerary Rock, a restored building with a thatched roof. Here, the Incas purportedly mummified their nobility.

In 1911, Machu Picchu came to the world’s attention when American historian Hiram Bingham stumbled on it while searching for the lost city of Vilcabamba, the last Inca stronghold

against the devastating Spanish invasion. Because about 80 % of the skeletons found among the ruins were female, Hiram theorized that the site had been a city of chosen women – a virgin convent of some sort.

Most theories about the ruins are mere speculations because the Incas didn't leave any written documents describing the site. Occasionally, a Spaniard wrote down his biased opinion of the Inca civilization and the Incas themselves left these elaborate knotted strings called quipus, which haven't been fully interpreted, but that's about the extent of our knowledge of the Incas.

On the way to the ticket gate, we passed a series of connected ceremonial baths cascading through the ruins along a flight of stairs. Near the baths stood the round Temple of the Sun with its finely crafted stone masonry (more stones so close together, it's amazing!). First we had to purchase our tickets at the ticket house near the Machu Picchu Hotel which is outside the park beside the road where tour buses arrive. Coming from the Inca Trail, we had already entered the park, but guards check everyone wandering the ruins, steeply fining anyone without a ticket. In other words, we had to exit the park, purchase our tickets and re-enter to wander among the ruins.

Ticket in hand, I walked through a maze-like entrance, followed a foot path, and entered the main area of Machu Picchu. Agricultural terraces lay among the ruins and six white llamas grazed on the green lawn of the Central Plaza. Already a few tourists wandered about, most from the Inca Trail and a few probably overnight guests at the hotel. Some large German tourists were taking pictures of the llamas; a man posing with them, pretending to jump on the back of one. The llamas continued to graze, ignoring the idiocy around them.

After the long arduous hike, I didn't care to spend my time listening to our tour guide Teddy recite everything he had learned about the ruins. How could it matter what some academic has interpreted this or that to be? I would not spend my time sitting in those ruins analyzing every stone structure. Rather, I was high in the mountains, the Andes, and had to be alone to experience its serenity and absorb what Machu Picchu really had to offer.

I walked alone beyond the llamas to sit among the ancient stonework and view the plaza and terraced slopes. After finding a perfect place at the far end of the plaza, away from tour groups and crowds, I sat and deeply inhaled the cool mountain air. This is my reward, I thought, this beautiful sanctuary high in the Andes. I breathed in the reassuring solitude, hearing songbirds in the nearby forest. The llamas continued to graze, unmolested for now. One seemed to look up at me, out of curiosity.

I could have sat there all morning. Never exploring any of the ruins. And that would have been all right. My thoughts envisioned a mighty Andean condor, its wings spanning ten feet as it effortlessly soared among the snowcapped Andes. My own spirit soared high. I felt so intimately connected to the earth, not just to the Andes, or anywhere else, but interconnected with the mountains and deserts alike, with the oceans, the animals, as though I were a hub for the life and geology surrounding me.

In about an hour, swarms of tourists invaded the ruins so I returned to the hotel restaurant where I met Don and our friend. Astonishingly, there were no tour buses parked outside the hotel and I learned that the road had washed out in a massive landslide a few days before. Consequently, the tour buses were dropping people off at the bottom of the mountainside and tourists were hiking up to the ruins. None of them had been warned, it seemed, because most wore inappropriate shoes (sandals, heels, or sneakers). When they started their ascent from the

bus, they had no clue that the trek would take three to four hours and that they'd be slogging up a muddy, rocky path, over huge boulders and through thick bristly foliage. A few older tourists had hired small boys to hold their hands and help them negotiate the steep climb. Hundreds of travelers couldn't possibly make the climb and had to sit in their buses. I can hardly imagine their disappointment.

As for us, hiking down the mountainside, passing these poor weary tourists was merely a small, though difficult, jaunt after four days on the Inca Trail. At the bottom of the mountain lay the Urubamba river treacherously plunging over boulders and passing mud cliffs on its northward journey to the Amazon.

In the town of Aguas Calientes we were herded aboard a Pullman on the train back to Cusco, along with a frightful number of other gringos rushing for their already assigned seat. It was so chaotic that Don had to jostle and argue with an obstinate gringo who took his seat and refused to move. This was all we needed after one of the most enduring adventures of our lives.

At midnight, our friend Alberto met us at the Cusco train station and saw us back to our hotel. We meekly mentioned our disappointment in the number of trekkers in our group, because sheer exhaustion prevented us from squeaking out more than a few words.

In retrospect, the trek through the Andes to Machu Picchu stands out as one of the most marvelous experiences of my life. Despite all the drudgery, the sloshing through mud, the achy muscles and breathless climbs, I would do it again—though not with a tour group. Instead, I would hire my own porters to carry my food and camping equipment. I would also include in my pack biodegradable toilet paper, mole skin, rain gear, dry socks, wipe-ups, triple antibiotic ointment and of course a flask of 100 proof. Really, there is nothing as spectacular as being atop the mystical Andes, soaring high in the clouds where the condors once flew in abundance.

