

Paul Stone

Addressing The Question Of What Happens To Snow That Never Falls

(excerpted from his novel *Or so it Seems*)

My little boy is sleeping.

Lying next to him in our shared bed I hear him rhythmically drawing air through his open mouth.

A week has passed and we have not yet spoken of the Pinewood Derby. Truly spoken about it. We have of course mentioned small inconsequential matters relating to the event but only in the peripheral way one talks about the condition of a sick person when he is close enough to overhear.

"Bad break," I said to him later that day when we were seeking distraction from our sorrows at the South Shore Plaza Food Court. "We almost went all the way."

"No big deal," he answered, choosing to focus on the Johnny Rocket cheeseburger in his hand rather than the unstated issues in the air.

The fact that neither of us was ready to bring up the real cause for our discomfort is a good indicator of how tender the wound still seemed.

And what could I say? "I am sorry Old Number Two looked like such a fruit salad?"

I do not think so.

Which is why a week later I have still not made any effort to clarify and explore that traumatizing experience for my little boy.

Not that I would know what to say.

If the purpose of life is to reach some understanding about the meaning of life I will probably have to retake this Do-It-Yourself Workshop a few hundred times before I am ready to graduate from the program.

Wilderness House Literary Review 3/4

To me the meaning of life remains as unfathomable a mystery as it ever was. Perhaps even more so the closer I come to seeing how things work.

I may need to leave it to someone else—to a future Paul Peterson in a future embodiment—to figure things out. He will have to penetrate the false facade of Automatic Universal Misunderstanding (*AUM*) to discover why I was repeatedly forced to experience something as upsetting—and weirdly ironic, considering my history—as the public humiliation of my only son.

What could be the purpose of *that*?

And what meaning could it have?

Especially when I recall how often I was told that *AUM*, Automatic Universal Misunderstanding, is merely an illusion; an illusion shared by almost everyone on the planet. A very believable illusion for sure but an illusion nevertheless.

Maya, as the Hindus have termed it.

“The Great Pretender’s greatest game of make-believe,” The Bapucharya calls it, adding, “He has only to sound the precise vibration and—ohmigoodness!—the physical universe disappears and we are all becoming (*pause for giggles*) out-of-work actors!”

No I do not enjoy the flavor of my *GUM*—my particular view of this Great Unrevealed Mystery—and would rather chew on something else. Something less emotionally destructive.

Simply put, I have had enough of...

I feel a soft blow against my shoulder.

It is Mickey’s arm flailing about as his body shifts under the covers, turning from one side to the other.

Wilderness House Literary Review 3/4

Without asking permission a smile spontaneously takes control of my facial muscles.

My little boy is facing me now!

Just look at him lying here next to me, his mouth half open, his eyes fully closed, his brow starting to crease in irritated response to the glare of the lamp. Look at the way the eyelid twitches as if a few errant light beams have already stolen their way in.

If the past provides any insight to the future he will soon grow irritated by the glare of my reading lamp and turn back onto his other side. But while he is facing in my direction I will take advantage of this fleeting opportunity to breathe in like a sweet breath of oxygen the spectacle of his unguarded innocence.

Have you ever seen anything more beautiful or with more power to pull at your heart? Lying here propped against my reading pillow, staring over bifocals that have once again dropped to the lower reaches of my nose, I realize how fortunate I am to be given moments like this. Moments where I can reach out and touch him as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

He would of course shake off my hand even in the midst of his slumbers. But he would shake it off automatically the same way he would shake off an annoying fly. He would not question my right as a bothersome, affectionate father to touch him, to reach out in the night to assure myself he is real and alive.

Why a father would need to do such things is another story, one he would not easily understand. But he would never challenge my right to claim that intimacy just as he would never question the right of the fly to land wherever it chooses.

For twenty three years I lived in the same apartment as my father until he died of a heart attack at the age of 49 and we never shared a bed together, much less one of life's major disasters like a Pinewood Derby.

Wilderness House Literary Review 3/4

And now every other weekend I live out the attenuated aftermath of my divorce, with two daughters sharing a sleeper couch in the living room of my tiny apartment and this vulnerable, trusting nine year old boy sharing my double bed in a bedroom that is barely larger than a closet.

This part of my divorce—having my children all to myself every other weekend—has been a gift. I may not always view it that way but occasionally on nights like this when I am far enough removed from my anger at Marilyn I can see it clearly for what it is.

Not as a sign of my loss but as evidence of my gain.

And then with nobody to hear my confession or smile ironically I can admit to myself that I probably became a better father for having had to work so hard at the job.

Without the divorce I might have put as little energy into raising my kids as my father did in raising my brother, sister and myself.

My mother was the one who raised us.

But you have already figured that out for yourself, I am sure.

Mom was the one who helped us shoulder our struggles in life. The one who took us to scout meetings, met with our teachers on open school nights, bandaged our cuts, brought us special presents when we were sick in bed and gave us all a reassuring sense that at least one person in the world was truly dedicated to our wellbeing.

And that that same one person loved us without reservation or regret.

I cannot remember my father saying he loved me—actually saying the words!—until I was sixteen. And then it was only in answer to an accusation.

We were arguing about a decision not to take me along on a trip to Florida. It was just a company sales convention but for some reason he

Wilderness House Literary Review 3/4

and my mother had decided to take Gail and leave me behind in Brooklyn Heights at my Aunt Ruthie's.

After a few half-mumbled complaints I accused him angrily, "You don't care about me!" in my best James Dean quiver. "You don't care about anybody but yourself!"

Three years earlier I would have risked my life to say such a thing. But by the time I was sixteen my father had mellowed considerably. So instead of hitting me he merely responded, "That's not true," shaking his head at my accusation. "I love you, and care about you. But you're still not going to Florida, no matter what you say!"

And there you have the entire repertoire of my father's *I love you's* recorded during my lifetime.

Anyway I cannot imagine my father lying awake in bed, kept up by thoughts and worries about his children. I especially cannot imagine him disturbed by concerns about *me*. And just look at me 35 years later! Lying here unable to sleep, worrying about Mickey's emotional fallout from a disastrous Pinewood Derby and the Milestones that event will inevitably erect on his Path Of Seeking Truth! Milestones he will find himself facing time and time again as he moves through his life and journeys down his Path Of Seeking Truth.

How Dad would have laughed at that. Parenting expert that he was he would have argued you only need worry about your children when they get sick, lost or beaten up. Anything else – well, that is their concern. Of course Dad knew nothing about Legacies, Milestones or any such Seeker stuff. He would have called it all nonsense, I am sure, more likely 'a load of crap' and forbidden me to waste his time talking about it.

It is beyond my imagination to think what my father would have made of The Bapucharya. I have an image of a caveman staring with great confusion at the Mona Lisa but I cannot say exactly how that image serves as a metaphor.

And speaking of metaphors I have had this thought ...actually, it is more

a fancy than a thought.

Yesterday here in Boston it was supposed to snow. The weather forecasters had predicted eight to ten inches with a foot more expected up north. What we actually experienced when everything was said and done was an unseasonably warm day in the upper fifties with the sun shining through high wispy clouds. A day as it turned out where thousands of snow shovels were sold in what was possibly the year's last frenzy of winter storm panic shopping.

Of course weather prediction is far from an exact science, especially in New England, but there is still something dramatic and momentous about a predicted snowstorm that never arrives.

When I was a child growing up in Brooklyn and would watch snow falling I can remember thinking that snow was some physical substance that collected in the clouds until there was so much accumulated it finally broke through. Almost like a mathematical formula describing the inevitable result of supply exceeding storage capacity.

One time when I was in elementary school we were told a major snowstorm was on the way but like yesterday's storm it never materialized. I recall wondering if someone might have made a mistake about the amount of snow that had accumulated in the clouds?

Maybe enough snow had not yet collected, I reasoned?
Or maybe they were right about the amount of snow piled up but wrong about how much the clouds could hold...?

Well whatever the reason, I was certain that the snow which had been predicted—the snow that did not fall—was still up there, high in the clouds...waiting. Waiting for more snow to collect. Waiting until the clouds were so full and sodden with snow they had no choice but to burst open.

Then of course all the snow would fall down and cover the asphalt streets of Brooklyn in a numbingly soft and pure whiteness.

Wilderness House Literary Review 3/4

As a child such simple ideas were the foundation of my understanding about the way things worked. No different, I would guess, from the assumptions and beliefs of most children.

Today when I wander through memories of my father, my mind approaches the subject with that same childlike innocence. And somehow I believe that the love I never received from my father was like the snow that never fell from the clouds. It did not vaporize or cease to exist but was merely held over. Waiting for enough love to collect. Waiting until so much love accumulated it would break through all restraints and finally—freed at last—fall like a gentle snow upon my life and the lives of my children.

As childish as it sounds something in me wants to believe that love builds up in the course of human experience so that if it fails to shower down in one life it will inevitably find release in another.

That same inner part of me knows that the love I share with my children has been made large and overwhelming by the love that never fell from my father's heart.

That hunger for a father's love must have colored Dad's childhood as well, since his father—my grandfather Izzy—was notorious for being a stern and distant parent. Is it any wonder then that Dad, being so unfamiliar with love and how to get it, searched for it so relentlessly outside the boundaries of his family?

Searching for it in his work, his friends, even in the company of strange women.

My father's tragedy was that he never saw the abundance lying nearby for the treasure that was always beyond his reach.

I believe we are all waiting for snow that never fell. Some of us, the lucky ones, learn to create that snow for ourselves while others only learn to imitate the loveless behavior of their parents.

"Dad," Mickey mutters, squirming under the covers, "would you turn

Wilderness House Literary Review 3/4

out the light!"

"In a few moments," I promise softly. "Turn over now and close your eyes."

He makes an angry noise and turns over as instructed.

"Thank you, sweetie," I whisper, tapping him softly on the shoulder.

"Grrr!" he answers.

"I love you," I tell him softly, almost singing the words.

"I love you, too," he grunts back with a testy shake of his body.

In scarcely a moment my little boy will be sound asleep again.

Most likely he will never remember waking up.

Most certainly he will never even know it snowed.