

Carpe Deism

I am the shit. I grab Life by its short hairs and I pull. I show up late, I stay out late. I break the rules. I speak without thinking, think aloud. Let my impulses lead the way.

I eat my apples unwashed.

I didn't used to be this way. Formerly, I was rather withdrawn. Someone who thought before he acted - indeed, if he ever did act. Came up with the right words to say five minutes after they were needed. Wrote rather than spoke. Thinking, always thinking. Always planning ahead, worrying about ramifications, living life in a state of check.

Case in point: Six months ago, using the toilet during my break at the video store where I work. The bathroom is wedged between shelves that end in Kurosawa, pick up again with Sergio Leone. Just a few feet away from where I sat, DVDs clicked, feet shuffled, couples coughed and argued the merits of the night's entertainment possibilities. If I could hear them -. In short, my fifteen-minute break stretched to nineteen as I sat with tensed cheeks trying to

gently loosen my sphincter. The best I could manage was the sad whine of a little released air.

I could not pass a stool within earshot of others.

Crazy, I know. Inhibited. Neurotic? By all means.

But - potty problems aside - was I not a better person for the way I held myself back? A wise man once wrote that civilization itself requires sublimating our most basic urges.

Yet I was afraid. And to the extent that I was afraid, I knew I wasn't living.

What was I afraid of? Other people. What they thought, what they might say, how they might react - and what they might take me for. A wise man - a different wise man - once said that hell consisted, as I understood it, of these other people. I would have concurred. My life was dying proof. I needed to change. I needed to stare down the blue ghost of fear and say "Boo!" Only in this way could I slowly gain the confidence one needs to make his way in the world.

As with so many things in life, there wasn't a single, momentous event causing my transformation from wimp to - if not exactly !bermensch, something far less wimpy. There were many small, precipitating factors, all working collectively like particles of drain cleaner in that old TV

commercial, slowly pushing and burrowing until finally, in one liberating burst, they unclogged all the gunk blocking my life.

The first particle of change, if you will, came in the form of a customer who frequented the video store. This man had the faraway look befitting his profession: he was a minister. I'd seen him climb out of his sedan in the empty lot of the New Life Baptist Church early one Sunday, and later I matched the name on the marquee with the one that popped up on my monitor. This man of the cloth came in every Thursday night to rent videos. Rented them religiously, you might say.

Pornography. Nothing but smut.

Yet on the occasion in question, this man deviated from his normal routine. He selected not an adult video but a title from the new releases wall.

Despite the implied contract regarding privacy between clerk and customer, I couldn't help commenting on his departure from the norm - perhaps even then evincing traces of the boldness I have henceforth adopted.

"Sometimes you've got to try something new," he replied, tilting his head slightly. "Otherwise you never really grow as a person. Know what I mean?"

I laughed because I thought what he said was funny. But after the dross of laughter had burnt away, so to speak, I realized there was a serious idea imbedded in all this dross.

A second important particle of change originated from a maxim printed, of all things, on the roll of paper towels attached to my broom closet. Goethe: "There is only today." I wrote the line on a three-by-five card and read it again. While I was at it, I wrote down, "Try something new or you'll never grow." Later, while watching TV, I heard a popular recording artist disclose how she'd learned to identify those things she was afraid of and to make a habit of facing them. When she spoke, her face beamed. She oozed a positive spirituality. I wrote down: "Move in the direction of your fears."

I began carrying the three-by-five card in my back pocket, much as I had done with Bible verses in my youth, pulling it out and reading whenever I remembered it was there. To the card growing creased and soft in my pocket I constantly added new, inspiring quotes I came across in my reading, positive messages about life that slowly came to replace the negative thoughts I'd carried with me from youth: "Setbacks are opportunities." I wrote that down. "My attitude is *my* responsibility." "Go to the futon!" (This

last quote bears explaining: A reminder to recognize and vent my angry thoughts by punching my pillow rather than let them fester inside.) I added more quotes, added more cards. I meditated upon the lines. Weeks passed. Eventually I replaced the cards with new ones, they had grown so worn, and wrote them out again by hand.

Okay, third change particle: I started taking an antidepressant, a close cousin of Prozac. One needs all the help one can get.

As part of the slow process that eventually afforded me a newfound sense of life, I acted on a long repressed desire to visit Europe. I cashed in two weeks of vacation time and finagled a third with some fancy shift shifting among colleagues. On the flight across the Atlantic I drank chardonnay for the first time and declaimed my plans to a retired Irish couple flying home from a wedding: I would land in London, get my bearings for a few days in an English-speaking country before riding the ferry to France and Paris, to conclude in Germany, land of my ancestors. Two cups later I'd brought out my cards, pointed to each quote and told its source and history, and related various quote-related successes and failures. By this point the couple seemed transfixed by articles in the in-flight magazine. In hindsight, I gathered that my more than usual

drinking had to do with the anxiety I felt about launching myself into the unknown. Or with fortifying myself in order to accomplish same.

Virtually my first act on British soil was to lean over the platform at Victoria Station and spew on the rails I'd just ridden, nearly splattering my first English rat.

Yet I look back on those three weeks as the happiest of my life so far -- though I have my sights set on surpassing them. I was constantly making alliances with other English speakers in the hostels and B & B's, commingling in museums, arguing and joking as I drank in bars and cafes. True, my party was waylaid by a trio of artists on the cobblestones of Montmartre who demanded forty Euros for their impromptu sketchings.

"Gullible American." *C'est la vie.*

On the last night of my trip, I felt high and dared myself to go higher - to conclude my trip on a high-pitched scream, if need be. I scanned the back pages of the free Berlin weekly for sex clubs. Between a photo of a leering, large-breasted and frankly not very attractive woman and one of a pale, bare-chested man, stern mouth visible beneath a Polizei cap, a simple, photo-less ad bordered by a scroll spoke to my imagination: "Binden Sie das los, das innen ist." Unleash that which is within.

Should I go? I hesitated.

Why did I hesitate? Because I was afraid.

Card please: "Move in the direction of your fears."

Presence required.

Upon entering the tiny foyer of this club, I was greeted by a partially naked woman -- horsewhip in hand, metal skull and crossbones dangling alongside a crucifix above her cleavage -- and ignored by an old man squatting motionless in the corner, naked above his blue socks and black shoes. Openings in the woman's black latex jumpsuit made her private parts public. She appraised me, puckered her lips, the master of ceremonies orchestrating a proper milieu for the place. "Twenty Deutsch Mark." A thick accent. "The night's theme is S & M. Kindly remove your clothes."

Perhaps our hero had gone too far.

The woman noticed me hesitate, and she sighed. She pointed to the squatting, blue-socked old man, his arms locked around his knees. With his short gray hair, he might have been upper management at Grundig or Mercedes. "We must wear as little clothes as possible, yes? We cannot make uncomfortable this man and the others."

What horrors might await me, I wondered, as I counted out twenty Marks and quickly -- *this is nothing new, I do*

this sort of thing all the time -- commenced unbuttoning my shirt.

Regardless of what might happen, I must face my fears. I handed over my jacket, shirt, and trousers (my inspiring cards hidden inside the back pocket - no time to review them now), and finally the all-important briefs, receiving - thankfully, at least in the short term - from Frau Brücher something to go with my black socks and hard-soled shoes: a pair of chrome-studded, black leather underwear.

The old man sat as still as Buddha. I felt a flash of anger toward the bastard. Disgust. He wasn't watching me dress, indeed he seemed to be in his own world, but I felt it somehow this old man's fault that people like me had to go to such ridiculous extremes.

I wanted to kick him.

As I entered the club proper, two tan, crew-cut bodybuilders wearing polka-dotted underwear and black hiking boots turned their heads. I searched desperately to find one woman on whom to rest my eyes, and indeed I found one lurking near the end of the bar, a slim but rather grim-looking specimen with faux red hair, one whose presence was perhaps meant to tell male thrill-seekers like me: *Yes, there are women here. You're not being ripped off.*

Only, upon closer inspection -- Adam's apple, hands --
I divined that this "woman" was a man.

And he saw me looking.

And he smiled.

"Bitte!" I waved down the bartender. "Ich m"chte ein
Beck's, bitte."

My urgency at ordering a beer might have explained the
surly look on the bartender's face. Either that or my
inexperience with the language. No matter how good your
German, the natives know you're a tourist. He looked like
he was debating reporting me to the manager, but eventually
he served me.

I took a long swallow of beer even as I told myself
that, alcoholwise, this was not a night to let loose. I
began taking in my surroundings, getting my bearings. To
the right, a DJ in corduroy cap bobbed around an elevated
platform spinning loud, techno dance music. In the center
of the dance floor hung a wooden swing suspended by thick
chains on which hung four Velcro straps, one high, one low
on either side. That couldn't be good. Near one of several
partially hidden couches at the back squatted the naked old
man from the foyer. When had he come in? He seemed like a
piece of furniture, a moveable fixture, content to expose
shriveled scrotum and white pubes to every passerby. His

image reminded me of something a psychic once told me: "I think that when you look back on your life, you'll see you've lived it in reverse. That you were born old and grew progressively younger." I tried to allay my fears by telling myself that now, on this night, I was on the cusp of becoming young again.

Nothing much was happening, but the two bodybuilders kept looking over at me and talking, their heads leaning toward each other, nodding. They were probably brothers, maybe twins, differentiated by one's drooping Fu Manchu moustache, iron-nail earring dangling from the right as opposed to the left ear, and green instead of red polka dots on his sole article of clothing. Neither had a single hair on his body that I could see. Two stools to my side, a skinny, older man with dyed, bowl-cut hair redolent of Hitler or Moe Howard half-smiled or smirked at me. He wore the male version of the hostess's nipple-exposing vest, but the lack of anything pushing from the inside left a sad gap between skin and leather. The man moved his lips, and though I could hear little except loud music, I suspect he growled at me.

With my boys snug tight in their leather diaper, I felt like a man wrapped in a small, leather, chrome-studded security blanket. In the absence of knowing the rules, I

judged that the present situation was similar to taking a shower at the gym after a workout. I actively avoided eye contact with my half-clad compatriots to assure them of my heterosexual status. And yet, even with my strategy of pouring new wine into old wineskins, as it were, the two bodybuilders eventually made their way toward me. Later I would learn that my mere presence in this club marked me as gay; my lack of eye contact further proclaimed me a "bottom."

But that was later.

While sitting there sipping my beer, with presentiments of things to come, I admit, I had my night in Gethsemane, my dark S & M Night of the soul. I couldn't help blaming the minister back home for my predicament, and pondered whether he was a hypocrite. In his espousal and proclamation of the Christian faith, with its injunctions against sins of the flesh and lust in the heart, was this man's penchant for porn -- engaged when his wife was away, perhaps attending a Bible study with like-minded parishioners whose company she enjoyed, if truth be told, more for social than spiritual reasons - a sin?

But wait. I wasn't still hung up on sin, was I?

The relative morality of this man's actions probably haunted me because of my own Christian upbringing, nominal

vestiges of which (guilt) still haunted me from time to time. Which is why, after thinking about the minister's culpability, I considered my own. Perhaps, flipping the situation around, it was immoral of me to be in this club because I was a heterosexual in what was increasingly looking like a homosexual establishment, a man ostensibly with no interest in the devilments that might occur there, so that I presented a kind of false advertising.

But I was speaking of the minister.

Are we really better people for avoiding what our hearts are drawn to? Perhaps the minister's secret sensual pleasure was one that tormented him no end, yet thereby gave his life balance, kept him from going over the brink. Perhaps stroking himself to an image of naked flesh not his wife's prompted him to write moving, realistic, guilt-inspired sermons that pulled believers out of their beds on Sunday mornings, exhorted them to live moral, responsible, neatly sublimated lives, the kind of respectable life destined to elude him, though outwardly he would be well-respected, admired, and even, by some, loved.

Who's to say?

These were my thoughts as I slowly sipped my Beck's. My mind worked to form a maxim, something to write on a

card, something about how it is only through darkness that one comes to the light.

#

So what happened at the Berlin leather bar?

My polka-dotted overlords decided to have a little fun, they the S, I the M. I've blocked out most of the details. That's a lie. You want details? A squeaking chain. Cheering. Chrome studs and leather stretched taut at my ankles, arms above my head like the crucified Lord, gliding back and forth, suffering on every backswing a good ass-slap. *Touristische Falle*, they called it. Not "fallen tourist" as I imagined but "tourist trap," a little tradition they enjoyed with adventurous Americans.

The evening inspired a firestorm of new thoughts over the next few days, ones I've yet to write down. (I find that I am less motivated to write these days.) Half-formed quotes about how we broadcast our insecurities in ways that direct others' actions; about how words have one truth but experience a deeper, yet inarticulate truth; about not being addicted to results; about how one never arrives.

But know this: Before our hero left the club, before he retrieved his clothes and jacket, before he pulled on

his shirt outside in the chilly air and walked the streets of a strange city, to embark on a Life thenceforth to be Large -- overly stressed by the evening's events, he felt his bowels loosen. He had to go; he had to go now. He entered the men's room and found two stalls, one occupied - - those omnipresent blue socks visible beneath the divider. Our hero dropped his chrome-studs, sat on the toilet, and unloaded. The toilet seemed to explode with his expulsions. A brief intermission. More bombs, more detonations. The old man couldn't escape fast enough. I held nothing back. I released myself; I sang myself. I leaned forward and let loose like there's no tomorrow.