

THE VOICE

MAGAZINE

Vol 20 Iss 39 2012-10-12

Thinking Straight

Put on your blinkers

Smiles for Miles

The secret of happiness

Siren Call

Stop and succeed

Plus:

*From Where I Sit
In Conversation
and much more!*



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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We love to hear from you! Send your questions and comments to voice@voicemagazine.org, and please indicate if we may publish your letter.



STUDY SPACE

Maxie van Roye



Thinking Cap

Now that Thanksgiving's over and the month's moving toward Halloween, we're entering the middle of the race—that time when we've lost our initial momentum coming out of the starting gate, but we're not quite ready to use up the burst of energy that we'll need for the homestretch.

Work's piling up and we're getting behind. We've become a bit burned out, perhaps, or at least we're anxious about coming assignments and exams. Stressed and losing interest fast, we allow ourselves to be distracted by the many, many opportunities for time-wasting that come our way. How to deal?

Not all wisdom comes from ancient sages. When I asked my six-year-old what advice she'd have for someone who might be struggling with homework, her advice struck a chord with me: in her words, "When you are having trouble at school, try a thinking cap! Just put it on and you will see."

What is a thinking cap, anyways? I'd always thought of it as some sort of futuristic contraption that downloaded knowledge directly into one's brain circuits. But today, as I watched my daughter's little fingers painstakingly type the words, I started seeing the world through a first-grader's eyes.

Because maybe a thinking cap is less of a fount of intelligence and more of a set of blinkers. In elementary school, we were told to "put on our listening ears," ears that tune in to what's being said by the teacher in front of us. So maybe a thinking cap is just a little more complicated version of the whole thing—an imaginary device that helps us keep distractions out of our mental sphere.

It's no secret that we're living increasingly distracted lives. Busy schedules, multiple commitments, and above all the flip-switch-flip culture spawned by TV, Facebook, and text messaging have all conditioned us to respond whenever we're called.

In fact, a thinking cap might be the best weapon in our homework arsenal. While listening ears may have helped us get through elementary school, it's the anti-distraction thinking cap that we need as adults, when our time and direction are our own to determine—or to throw away. In fact, more often than not we gladly accept distractions: look up, click the link, check the text, flip channels. All the while, precious time is going down the drain.

This week, in the face of all the opportunities for time-wasting, I'm going to put on my thinking cap and set my sights on what's ahead, looking toward the horizon rather than to what's going on around me. My daughter advised me to "Try it. You will see."

I think I will.

IN CONVERSATION

Wanda Waterman

**A Syrian Kurd: Part III, Panic and Bravado in Assad's Syria**

"Sometimes paranoia's just having all the facts."

William S. Burroughs

Moustafa Mala Bozan is a Kurdish poet and musician from the city of Kobany in northern Syria, not far from Aleppo. He's been corresponding online with Wanda Waterman for the past year, during which time he's been imprisoned, has lived in refugee camps, and has travelled across Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. Read the first part of this series [here](#) and the second part [here](#).

Moustafa visits Lebanon, as he does often. When he returns to Syria via Homs, his bus is stopped by government forces. From his window he witnesses an incidence of brutality, which he tries to record on his cellphone. He's seen, arrested, and imprisoned once more.

After he's released, he contacts me again. Normally swaggering with bravado, Moustafa is now glancing skittishly over his shoulder every minute. He can't sleep and is obviously drinking too much. He notes with agitation that an email message I've sent him has been opened already, before he got there. It's the only one that's been opened. This almost terminates his mission to get his story out. He insists that from now on I contact him only on his Turkish cellphone number, the only one he feels is safe.

One day on Facebook I'm asking him about the PKK and he's telling me what he knows, when suddenly his tone changes from warm to icy.

Hey, you know I'm not so high educate, and I went to school just 10 years. And what you asked is about policy and my work is in industry—I have had a factory. If you ask me about employment here in those countries I can answer you very well.

Not educated? Moustafa is multilingual and extremely well-read. Even if he did drop out of school early, his autodidactic habits have effectively rendered him smarter than the average bear. And this is the first I've heard of a factory . . .

I suggest talking to his friends, but he now insists that they're all simple, uneducated men like him (before, they were all writers and professionals). He then derails the topic to ask me if I know Bryan Adams. After this he breaks into a strange code in which he tries to tell me to talk to him tomorrow, that he will have something for me then.

Finally it gets through my thick skull that he's acting, sending me covert messages warning me to avoid revealing anything to whomever might be spying on our conversation.

It strikes me that this may have been what he was doing before during earlier choleric episodes—putting me off because of some sign that our discussion was no longer private.

He suggests that the trauma of war is taking its toll on mental health in Kobany. Is this true or still part of the code?

Not just me have this illness—almost of my friends have it, I think it's because of the weather. It's turned from winter to spring. Some of my friends don't sleep at home because of their illness. They had the same illness which I have now but me still sleeping in my home, thanks god. They are sleeping in hospital.

After several weeks the paranoid tenor of his conversation dissipates. Is this because the trauma of his last prison stay has diminished or because Assad's tentacles are weakening their hold on cyberspace?

I have no way of knowing, but I'm glad to see Moustafa get his groove back. Against my protests he insists that I print his real name, and he tells me I can use his photo.

On Skype he gets an angry, insulting message from a female friend. It amuses him enough that he posts it as his mood message. When I ask him about it, he shrugs: *We had a fight and she blocked me. But not completely. If we want to talk again, we know how to find each other.*

(To be concluded next week.)

"A hundred men can sit together quietly but when two dogs get together there will be a fight."

Kurdish proverb

DID YOU KNOW?

Minding My Own Business



Most of us have at some time—even if only briefly—entertained the dream of running our own businesses. Maybe we already have a great idea, one that we're sure would be at least a moderate success. But making the jump between idea and reality is such a drastic step that we get stuck at stage one; overwhelmed, we back away too soon and our plans go by the wayside.

MyOwnBusiness, a free online resource for entrepreneurs, seeks to change this by "helping people start and succeed in business." The site offers free courses which guide students through the often complicated process of creating and building small businesses. Courses cover topics like business plans, insurance, negotiating, growth, and even exit strategies, and textbook versions of the online course contents are also available.

If you've already taken the class, you can apply to become an instructor; in addition to being accessible online, the courses are also suitable for in-person instruction at community colleges, non-profit organizations, or even private tutoring sessions.

THE TACKY CHEESE AWARDS

WHY WE LOVE "B" GRADE SCI-FI FLICKS

NOMINEES IN THE SPECIAL EFFECTS DEPARTMENT . . .



Plan 9 from Outer Space for visible string supporting the flying saucers



Robot Monster for the alien's costume, comprised of a gorilla suit, a diving helmet, and two television antennae



Teenagers from Outer Space for using a lobster's shadow to indicate the presence of a hideous alien monster



Battle Beyond the Stars for the Freudian space ship. Look closely. Yes— those are breasts.

BY WANDA WATERMAN, WITH CREATIVE INPUT FROM BEN WATERMAN



Teacher or Student

A great deal has been written about the relationship between kids and grandparents. The stereotypical image is the grandparent deliberately spoiling the child and then smugly returning the brat to the unsuspecting parents.

Another, sadder scenario is the broken relationship in which through power tripping or vindictiveness, the parents ration or withhold contact between child and grandparent. Or the situation where one set of preferred grandparents gets a disproportionate amount of interaction while the others are shut out.

Sometimes the distance is imposed by the grandparents themselves. They didn't enjoy parenting and now believe their job is done and that the freedom from helping is well-deserved.

Then there are the parents and grandparents who because of their own failings or rough break don't have the wherewithal to recognize or facilitate this crucial relationship. Sadly, they don't have the inner or external resources to share.

Sometimes the parents' decision to distance their children (and themselves) from the grandparents is an act of protection. And courage. They are determined that the abuse, manipulation, and other dysfunctional and destructive behaviour they endured will not be permitted to hurt another generation.

Then finally there are the users. Those parents who expect the grandmother to babysit all the time. It might be a formal arrangement that allows the mother to go back to work or a more loose one whenever mom and dad "need a break" from the demands of parenting.

The relationship we have with Grady and his parents is respectful, symbiotic, and balanced. We're too far away to be taken advantage of, but eager to help whenever we can. For longer farm visits we choose what works for us and make the offer, and they consider it a windfall of time, freedom, and sleep-ins. Greg and Carrie welcome us into Grady's life, and for that we are grateful.

That being said, it's hard to tell who reaps the greatest benefit, Grady or us. He was at the farm during harvest. A different kind of kid might not have been welcome during this distracted and dangerous time of year, but his ability to understand the rationale for rules—and our vigilance—make it work.

He “helped” me fill the slip tank with diesel. He watched grain trucks being unloaded. We packed lunches. In between the work, we played. He found Gido’s secret hiding place for potato chips and helped himself several times before returning the emptier package to its spot. When it was missing the next day, Grady confronted him for an explanation!

I marvel at his vocabulary, conversational skill, and strength. When he grew tired of waiting for me to uncover the sandbox, he dragged a 4 x 8 foot sheet of plywood off it himself. After we visited the dugout down the road, like Forrest he ran the half mile non-stop back to the farm.

I show him nature. He shows me the hunger to learn. With this little kid I’m not sure if I’m the teacher or the student, from where I sit.

Hazel Anaka’s first novel is Lucky Dog. Visit her [website](#) for more information or follow her on Twitter @anakawrites.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS DESK



At Home: Internationally Confused

Canada and the US have similarities, to be sure. But that doesn’t quite explain how a drunk driver somehow crossed the border into Canada yet had no idea she’d entered a different country.

As the *Toronto Sun* [reports](#), Cassandra Olbrys was “so plastered she thought she was in Detroit when she crossed the Blue Water Bridge into Canada.” She told border officials that she “had been trying to go home.”

Olbrys, who “had no prior criminal record,” had blood alcohol levels “two-and-a-half times over the legal limit.” She was fined and is banned from driving in Canada for a year.

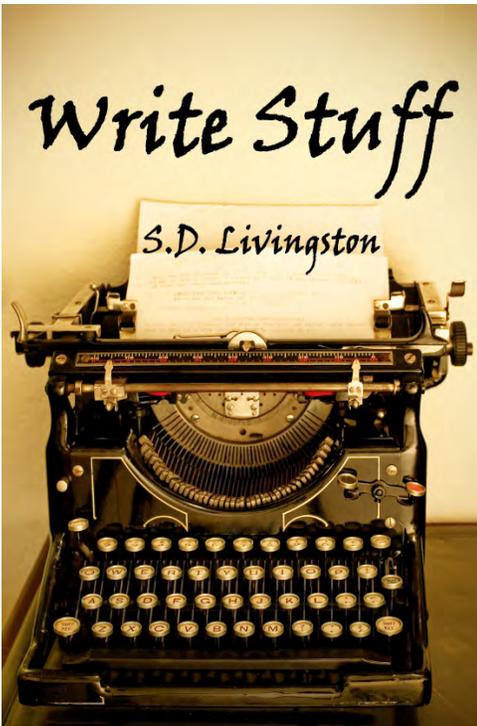
Around the World: Deadly Bug Snacks

Extreme eating is an increasingly popular sport. But it could be deadly, as in the case of one Florida man.

As the CBC [reports](#), 32-year-old Edward Archbold “died shortly after downing dozens of . . . live bugs as well as worms.” He was one of 30 contestants participating in a roach-eating contest.

Archbold “became ill shortly after the contest ended and collapsed”; he was rushed to the hospital but was pronounced dead there.

Authorities are unsure whether the death was due to the bugs, particularly since “[none] of the other contestants became ill.” “Unless the roaches were contaminated with some bacteria or other pathogens, I don’t think that cockroaches would be unsafe to eat,” an entomology professor told reporters.



Friday Finds: Turning Pro

October 13 is Plain Language Day. To celebrate it, I had planned to write about the growing movement to give complex, indecipherable documents a shove out the door and replace them with clear, understandable prose. As luck would have it, I came across one of the most direct pieces of writing I've seen in a long time—one that proves you don't need convoluted sentences to say something profound.

The book is *Turning Pro*, written by Steven Pressfield and published by Black Irish Books. It's relatively short, at just 148 pages in the print version. In a bookstore you'd likely find it shelved in the self-help section, but there's nary a self-affirmation or cheerful daily quote in its pages. Instead, Pressfield's prose is more like the Black Irish boxing glove logo: solid, muscular, and not given to pulling punches.

At heart, *Turning Pro* is a book about changing habits, and it follows the author's journey to becoming a successful writer. But your goal could just as easily be to land the corporate corner office or become a pro ball player. The hard-won wisdom and plain old common sense in the book's pages apply to almost any endeavour you can think of.

Unfortunately, many copies will probably end up gathering dust. Not that Pressfield's giving bad advice—quite the opposite, actually. Instead, it's because what he advises requires a quality that modern society undermines every day: focus. It's a rare commodity these days, with rapid-fire commercials, Twitter, and fractured attention spans becoming the norm.

I've said it before, but it's worth repeating: Neil Postman may as well have had a crystal ball, peering into the future from the 1980s, when he wrote *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. If that book was a prediction, Pressfield's is the prescription. In fact, in *Turning Pro* Pressfield could well be describing the endless loop of amusement and distraction that Postman warned us about—one that's already here.

Pressfield calls those habits an addiction, and he's right. Think about the last time you zoned out on hours of web surfing or television. As Pressfield writes, "The repetitive nature of the shadow life and of addiction is what makes both so tedious. No traction is ever gained. No progress is made. We're stuck in the same endlessly-repeating loop. That's what makes addiction like hell."



It's an amusing type of hell, no doubt about it. But if you keep wondering why you never seem to get that big project accomplished (finishing that course, writing that book, perfecting that free throw), Pressfield's addiction analogy is worth pondering. As he says, "[All] addictions share, among others, two primary qualities. 1. They embody repetition without progress. 2. They produce incapacity as a payoff."

There's far more to Pressfield's message than that, but if you're the least bit interested in realizing that goal you've been pondering for years, maybe it's time to turn off the funny cat videos and read the book.

S.D. Livingston is the author of several books, including the new suspense novel Kings of Providence. Visit her [website](#) for information on her writing (and for more musings on the literary world!).

CLICK OF THE WRIST

Go Veg

Eat too much last weekend? October—World Vegetarian Month—is the perfect time to make up for overindulging. Vegetarian fare isn't bland and tasteless; in fact, a large percentage of the world's population eats primarily meatless meals, and many of these are bursting with flavour. Add in new interpretations of old stand-bys, and you have a menu that just might get you rethinking meat.

Meatless Mondays

The Meatless Monday campaign advocates awareness of healthier and more sustainable eating by encouraging pledges to keep just one weekday vegetarian-friendly. The website contains some recipes, but even more resources (including materials for schools and organizations).

Vegan MoFo

Vegan Month of Food—Vegan MoFo for short—is a phenomenon that began online and spread rapidly. Food bloggers commit to posting a vegan recipe every day during the month of October. The main site highlights different categories of food each day. With over 800 bloggers participating, Vegan MoFo is a goldmine of menu ideas.

The Lighter Side

Surprisingly, some vegetarian and vegan recipes come loaded with fat and salt. The Fatfree Vegan Kitchen blog—one of my personal favourites—is full of delicious recipes as well as product and cookbook reviews. Subscribe to the feed or search the archives for recipes—not to mention ways to up the health factor of your vegan table!

Waste Not

You're all excited about cooking more vegetables—so how to keep produce fresh until you're ready to use it? This article, from *Vegetarian Times* magazine, has some suggestions and handy charts.



THE MINDFUL BARD

Wanda Waterman



Books, Music, and Film to Wake Up Your Muse and Help You Change the World

Film: *Happy* (Wadi Rum Films 2011)

Director: Roko Belic

Genre: Documentary

"A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones."

Proverbs 17:22 NIV

"One must choose happiness."

Stratis Myrivilis, in *Life in the Tomb*

The Care and Feeding of the Bluebird of Happiness

A handsome young Japanese businessman has, by conventional standards, an idyllic life: a lovely wife and a sweet young daughter, a beautiful home, and opportunities for career advancement in one of the richest industrialized countries in the world. But he's becoming more and more tired and depressed. Eventually, he quite literally works himself to death.

A young man in India supports his family by driving a rickshaw. He lives in a dirty hovel with a growing brood of unkempt children in close proximity to a horde of noisy, poor neighbours in a ramshackle village. And yet he wears an authentically joyful smile as he talks about how much he loves his work, his children, and his neighbours.

I had read about positive psychology (the study of happiness) while preparing for a psychology degree. Back then it was pooh-poohed by the stuffed shirts who preferred to grant a greater legitimacy to the study of depression.

But it was largely the study of depression that led to the initiative to study happiness; a researcher seeking solutions to depressive illness had the brilliant idea of studying happy people to try to find things that might make depressed people feel better.

Forty per cent of our capacity to experience happiness lies in our "intentional behaviours."

Even the initial findings were amazing and manifold. The field of study quickly justified itself; happiness was discovered to be an effective means of preventing illness, increasing longevity, improving social relations, and reducing crime. Happiness was not only worth studying, it was worth pursuing at the expense of ambition, image, status, and money.

The neurotransmitter held responsible for the nice feeling is dopamine. What raises dopamine levels in the brain? The simple answer is that certain experiences require or release dopamine. Exercise is one good example, but engaging in routine exercise doesn't generate as much dopamine as does performing exercise that's novel, unusual, always changing, funny, or even a little crazy.

“Happy makes clear the gulf between extrinsic goals (like money, image, and status) and intrinsic goals (like personal growth, relationships, and community feeling). Extrinsic and intrinsic goals are fundamentally opposed, and it's the intrinsic goals that are ultimately more satisfying to achieve.”

Before you don a gorilla suit and run grunting through a busy street, as did a group in this film, note that an individual's capacity to experience happiness is limited to some extent by DNA. About half of our propensity for joy is genetically determined. Environment and circumstances surprisingly account for only 10 per cent, and the remaining 40 per cent comes down to intentional behaviours. Which means this: to a large extent, your happiness levels depend on your choice of what to do.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, professor of psychology at Claremont Graduate University, is the author of *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. He proposes that certain activities, if engaged in with passion, will over time program the brain for greater happiness. This explains the method in the madness of those who seem addicted to activities that can't bring any perceivable benefits, such as rock climbing, surfing, writing poetry, or volunteering in community groups.

When they say that only 10 per cent of mood is determined by environment and circumstance, they're not kidding. Loss is devastating, but humans who choose to do so can come out of terrible circumstances just as happy as or even happier than they were before.

The story of Melissa Moody is a case in point. A lovely woman from a privileged background, she suffered a horrific, disfiguring accident that paralyzed her for months. While she was recovering, her husband divorced her and became an alcoholic. In her debilitated state she also recovered memories of having been violently sexually abused by her father as a young girl.

Somehow she emerged from her ordeal with joy to spare. Now happily remarried, she exhibits an enviable level of serenity.

Happy makes clear the gulf between extrinsic goals (like money, image, and status) and intrinsic goals (like personal growth, relationships, and community feeling). Extrinsic and intrinsic goals are fundamentally opposed, and it's the intrinsic goals that are ultimately more satisfying to achieve.



Manoj Singh pulls rickshaw, Kolkata, India.
Photo: Wadi Films Productions.

Here's the proof: In a nutshell, what are the top dopamine-producing conditions that render humans happy?

- friendship
- family closeness
- a close, supportive community
- a healthy lifestyle
- fun
- a grateful attitude
- optimal experience
- acts of kindness

Surprised at the last one? Don't be. Ultimately it's old-fashioned ethical values that trump hedonism every time.

Happy manifests eight of the Mindful Bard's criteria for films well worth seeing: 1) it poses and admirably responds to questions that have a direct bearing on my view of existence; 2) it provides respite from a sick and cruel world, a respite enabling me to renew myself for a return to mindful artistic endeavour; 3) it is about attainment of the true self; 4) it inspires an awareness of the sanctity of creation; 5) it displays an engagement with and compassionate response to suffering; 6) it gives me tools of compassion, enabling me to respond with compassion and efficacy to the suffering around me; 7) it renews my enthusiasm for positive social action; and 8) it makes me appreciate that life is a complex and rare phenomenon, making living a unique opportunity.

Wanda also penned the poems for the artist book They Tell My Tale to Children Now to Help Them to be Good, a collection of meditations on fairy tales, illustrated by artist Susan Malmstrom.



Photo: Wadi Films Productions.

AUSU UPDATE



AU Students urge candidates to improve university funding

AU students are concerned about the financial health of Athabasca University and the effect of recent news stories on the reputation of the AUSU membership.

A recent CBC report notes that in recent years the university has made a series of reserve draws to cover budget shortfalls, draining the once \$30-million reserve fund.

Tuition and fees at AU, meanwhile, continue to increase despite the concerns of AUSU that education is becoming increasingly unaffordable in Alberta.

“I’m very concerned about AU’s financial situation,” says AUSU President Bethany Tynes. “AU is increasing student fees, observing hiring freezes, denying sabbaticals, delaying projects, and downsizing their offices due to a lack of available funds. We don’t want to see the quality of our education diminish.”

“At the same time,” Tynes continues, “I am confused by AU Board Chair Barry Walker’s comment to the CBC that AU is ‘in a very sound financial position,’ as the concerns we’ve noted do not support the notion that we’re financially sound.”

Chronic underfunding of public post-secondary education is a factor in AU’s financial stress. AU students have lobbied Alberta in recent years to address the shortfall; our members call on the candidates in Alberta’s provincial election to make post-secondary funding a priority in their platforms and to ensure that all Alberta universities are funded equally and sufficiently. Public post-secondary institutions need a reliable, predictable funding model that provides sufficient base operating funds to support a world-class education.

Athabasca University Students' Union is the largest students’ union in Alberta, representing nearly 40,000 undergraduates annually.

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This column is provided by AUSU to facilitate communication with its members. The Voice does not write or edit this section; all content has been exclusively and directly provided by AUSU, and any questions or comments about the material should be directed to ausu@ausu.org.

CLASSIFIEDS

Classifieds are free for AU students! Contact voice@voicemagazine.org for more information.

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