

On Dick W. C. Anderson . . . And Me
Robert S. Griffin
www.robertsgriffin.com

One way to look at life is as an accumulation of memories along with the private thoughts and associations one links to them. The longer the life, the more memories and linkages. And with the arrival of old age, which is me now, the more time a person gives over to these internal, subjective realities.

A memory that came to me in a quiet moment a couple of weeks ago--I can't say for sure what prompted it--had to do with a man I encountered just once many, many years ago by the name of Dick W. C. Anderson. Anderson wasn't one of the pillars of the community, as they say. Just the opposite. He had brutally murdered a thirty-four-year-old mother of four children ages six to thirteen, Carol Thompson, early one morning in her up-scale home in Saint Paul, Minnesota, where I grew up and around where I was living at the time. This was the early 1960s. The case was front-page news for months because of the circumstances surrounding the crime: Carol Thompson's husband, T. Eugene Thompson, a thirty-six-year-old, on-the-rise attorney, had arranged the murder. I was a spectator in the small courtroom in across-the-river Minneapolis (there'd been a change of venue) where T. Eugene Thompson was being tried for the crime the day that Dick W. C. Anderson took the stand and recounted how he had murdered Carol Thompson. The memory of that experience in the courtroom is what popped into my mind a couple of weeks ago, and I've been thinking about it and that time in my life and giving it meaning. Writing this thought is part of that process.

I went to the Thompson trial with my wife and twelve-years-old sister. The three of us got in a line outside the courtroom, and they let people in until the quota of thirty or so spectators was reached, and we made it in and took our seats. When I first thought about this occasion a couple of weeks ago I decided that it had to have been late in the fall of 1963 because my wife was well along in her first pregnancy, and our son was born on December 15th of that year. I was twenty-three and she was twenty-one. At the time, we were living in a downscale, second floor apartment in West Saint Paul, a working class suburb of Saint Paul--on Stickney Street, I

remember the street after all this time. One of my wife's relatives, an aunt as I recall, had given us some living room furniture that was torn and reeked of pet urine, but that was OK with me--just about anything was OK with me in those years--but more than that, giving us the furniture, torn and smelly or not, was nice of her to do, and both my wife and I were very appreciative of her kind gesture.

I was unemployed at the time and half-heartedly, truth be told, looking for a secondary school teaching job. Or any kind of job, really, I would have taken anything. I'd stroll along University Avenue, which connects Saint Paul and Minneapolis and was lined with a lot of big companies, and I'd walk into a building and ask the first receptionist I saw, it didn't matter what the company was, I didn't pay attention, if I could fill out a job application. She, it was always a woman, would either tersely say no, or, without comment, reach under her desk and hand me a form to fill out, and I'd do that and be on my way. I didn't ask to talk to anybody about a job; I'd touch down as lightly as I could and be gone, and after doing that for a while I'd go home and take a nap, which more than anything I was looking to do. The only response I remember getting from that activity--I really didn't expect anything would come out of it--was an interview for a claims adjuster position at an insurance company, and so help me, I didn't know what a claims adjuster was. As I look at it from this vantage point, it's just as well that I didn't get that claims adjuster job.

My wife was supporting the two of us as a secretary. I don't remember thinking much at all about what was going to happen to us financially after she had the baby and was forced to quit working. As it turned out, I got a high school teaching job right around the time my son was born, in North Saint Paul, a town just, well, north of Saint Paul--the North High Polars, as the teams were called. This was December, well into the school year, and I was sitting in the office of the principal that was going to interview me for the teaching job, and as part of introducing me to the principal the guy who had contacted me said, "I was really surprised at what I was able to dig up at this late date." I was what he dug up, which was fine with me; it fit my self-perception pretty well at the time, something you dig up if you were in a bind. The job was replacing a social studies teacher--Raul Piersdorf, these names come back--whose wife had just died. Raul wanted to work only half time because he thought he needed to be home with his children more.

The principal fleshed out my workload at the school to full-time by giving me a couple of study halls and lunchroom supervision in addition to Raul's classes. \$6,200 a year. Sounded really good to me. That marked the beginning of my career in education, which has lasted to this day.

My mother had died three years before, and my father, with whom I had always been estranged, was dying of cancer. Besides my sister, I had a brother, seventeen years older, whom I saw infrequently, and then very impersonally--he had left the house when I was three for the army and then got married and was involved with starting a family and a career. My sister must have come up with the idea of attending the trial and working out the logistics of getting to the courtroom. Setting up anything like that, taking initiative like that, would not have been something either my wife or I would have taken on. At that time, both of us were, how to put it, minimally engaged with life, which included each other.

I had followed the newspaper accounts of the arrest and trial of T. Eugene Thompson as much as I followed anything in those years, which wasn't all that much. Relatively speaking, though, the case got a lot of my attention because it was a huge story, so I knew basically what was going on in the case, and the idea of going to the trial suited me well enough. For that matter, in those years anything suited me well enough; I went along with just about anything that came up. Even though I don't imagine my sister planned it that way, it turned out that the three of us were there on a big day: Anderson was going to take the stand and tell what happened to Carol Thompson.

So there the three of us were in this little courtroom. Along with a couple of his attorneys, in walked the defendant, T. Eugene Thompson--diminutive, sharply-dressed, super-short, flat-top haircut, wearing glasses of the sort they wore in those years (plastic, thick black temple pieces, black lens top-halves, clear bottom-halves), ramrod-straight, staring straight ahead. They took their seats at a long table just a few feet away from us, their backs to us. By this time, Thompson had celebrity status locally. I was taken by how small he was. Celebrities were bigger than that in my mind, certainly bigger than I was, and there was Thompson, this little guy.

Then the judge came in, robes, sat up high.

Dick W. C. Anderson was sworn in. I remember thinking he had kind of a neat name--Dick W. C. Anderson. Better than Bob Griffin, which is what I was called at the time, although I could never figure out how you got Bob from Robert. But that's the way it was, so I was Bob. Anderson looked to be in his mid-thirties. He was neatly dressed in a blue suit and white shirt and tie. Well-groomed, blondish, medium length hair parted on the side, working class (he was a roofer), a tad thuggish, but more rugged than thuggish. Trim, straight features, quite handsome, actually. Especially in his suit, you'd take notice of Anderson on the street; nice looking guy, you certainly wouldn't pick him out of a crowd as a killer.

The prosecutor, William Randall--tall, craggy-looking (I remember him being referred to in the newspaper as "Lincoln-esque"), impressive, had the ring of being somebody to be admired--took Anderson through his part in the crime. Anderson had admitted to committing the murder, though he said he was recruited by a third party and had never met Thompson. This much I knew back then. Anderson was in court that day to tell about the arrangement to murder Carol Thompson and how he killed her.

In detail, Anderson recounted how he murdered Carol Thompson early one weekday morning that previous March--the 6th, a Wednesday, as I've recently learned. All though his recitation, he was laconic, diffident, low-key, matter of fact. The grisly tale was made even more shocking and disturbing--and it was that--coming out of this apparent everyman in such mundane fashion. He could have been describing a trip to the grocery store. All I can remember is being oh-my-god stunned by the substance of what I was hearing.

Throughout Anderson's testimony, the lead defense attorney--whose name was Hyam Segell, I've just learned--would interrupt with objections, and he and Randall would get into heated exchanges. They really went after one another. There were a couple breaks in the session, and on one of them I stood next to the two men standing together in the hall smoking cigarettes and chatting amiably. It hit me that the sniping back and forth in the courtroom that I had assumed reflected personal animosity between the two didn't at all reflect that. They were just doing their jobs. It wasn't personal between the two of them, and yet just a few minutes before it had seemed very personal to me. Oh, I thought to myself--

or felt in the kind of total, undifferentiated way I processed reality in those years--people just sort of play roles, like in a stage play. (Later on in life, I was actually in theatre and learned what actors really do.) I had always been straight ahead in my dealings with the world, totally literal, what you saw is what you got. Any distance between me and what I did--posturing, ironic detachment, anything like that--was not in my repertoire, nor did I take into account that kind of thing being a possibility in other people's presentations.

Standing next to Randall and Segell, I remember thinking--or, again, better, feeling in a gross, barely articulate way--that these two tall and composed men in their no-nonsense, grown-up suits were serious men, real men, in-the-world men, in contrast to me, a nobody and nothing, at best a voyeur. If they had turned in my direction, I would have assumed that they would have looked right past me--or if their eyes did fall exactly in my direction, seen nothing. I felt invisible in those years, and, I think, in a very real way I was. Virtually no one knew I was alive, and the few that knew I existed were by and large indifferent to that fact, and I had accepted that as an appropriate response, or I guess it is non-response, to me.

The three of us sat silently through the session, and silently filed out as we were directed. None of the spectators took into account the others, even looked at them. It was like it was just the three of us, separate from everybody else, an island unto ourselves. On the way home and later, I don't recall my sister, wife, and I discussing what we had witnessed that day, which, as I think about it now, was truly remarkable. I didn't rehash it in my mind, and I have never spoken or written about this experience until now.

When the memory of that day in court came up for me recently I recalled very little of what Anderson had said on the stand. I only remembered being stunned by what I was hearing. I knew Thompson had been convicted and sentenced to life in prison, but that was it for me until these past couple of weeks. I became curious to find out what had actually gone on in Carol Thomson's murder, so I located and read an out-of-print book on the case written in the late 1960s by a local newspaper reporter.*

From the book, I learned that T. Eugene had spent a year buying life insurance policies on Carol that paid out more than a million dollars in the case of her accidental death. In addition to

the money, getting Carol out of the way paved the way for him to move forward in his relationship with his girlfriend. Thompson hired a former client of his, Norman Mastrian, now middle aged but at one time a prizefighter of some local prominence, to kill his wife and make it look like an accident. Mastrian would knock Carol out with a piece of rubber hose and drown her in the bathtub. Mastrian was to enter the Thompson house before dawn through a door that Thompson would leave open and hide in the basement until the children went off to school and Thompson had had enough time to get to his law office and establish an alibi. Thompson would leave water in the bathtub, where the drowning would take place, and chain the front door to keep anybody from walking in unexpectedly. Thompson would move a portable phone to a jack next to the basement door and call at a prescribed time and Mastrian would have ready access to Carol as she stood by the door talking to her husband.

For reasons that have never been clear, Mastrian subcontracted the work--he recruited Anderson to take his place and kill Carol Thompson. It could very well be that Thompson never knew it was going to be Anderson, not Mastrian, murdering his wife. Mastrian's offer to Anderson was \$4,000 if it looked like an accident and \$2,000 if it didn't. Anderson wasn't sure he'd be able to pull off the apparent accident and wanted a gun to take along with him on the job, and while he would try for the accident he wanted \$3,000 either way it went. Mastrian agreed to that, and gave Anderson a piece of hose, a Luger pistol, drew a map of the layout of the house, and talked him through the arrangements he had worked out with Thompson, hiding in the basement and the phone call and the water in the bathtub. There wasn't much lead-time in all of this. Mastrian and Anderson worked things out just a couple days before the murder.

The book I read provided a detailed account of Anderson's testimony. So I got to read what I supposedly had heard forty-seven years before. It isn't often that we get to go back and see what actually happened in contrast to what we experienced and made of what happened later on. I was taken by how new it was to me. I didn't remember these details much at all. I wonder if I ever took them in given what I was like in those years. I only remember my "I can't believe I'm hearing this!" overall reaction. What follows is taken from the transcript of Anderson's testimony, the day I was

sitting a few feet away. The date was November 27, 1963. That was a Wednesday. The Kennedy assassination had happened the previous Friday. My son would be born two and half weeks later, December 15th.

Anderson testified that before daybreak he parked his car a block away from the Thompson house and entered it through the unlocked side door he'd been told about. Everything was dark, so he turned on a pencil flashlight and found the basement door and went down the stairs into the basement and hid in a storeroom. On his way down the stairs, he noticed that they creaked. From the basement storeroom he heard the sounds of breakfast being prepared and eaten and the children go off to school. He heard Mr. Thompson say "I don't have time for more coffee, I've to get to the office" and then a door close and the soft footsteps of Mrs. Thomson in the kitchen and then going up the stairs to the second floor, and then silence.

Anderson waited for the phone to ring at 8:25 as arranged, the call from Thompson that would get Carol next to the basement door. The phone rang at 8:28 by his watch, which he could see with the pencil flashlight. It rang "quite a few times," and then there were footsteps down the stairs from the second floor. "I heard a lady's voice," Anderson said. He was supposed to come up the stairs at that point and confront Carol, but he thought about the creaking stairs and decided to wait until she returned upstairs, which she did.

"I then came out of the storage room in the basement to the main area and injected a shell into the chamber of the gun," Anderson recounted. "I put on surgical gloves. I went up the basement stairs very slowly on the side of the stairway. I looked into the kitchen to see if anybody was there."

Anderson went into the living room to make sure no one was on the main floor. He then walked quietly to the stairway leading to the second floor and started slowly, carefully, up the stairs. On the second floor, he checked the back bedroom, the east bedroom, the southwest bedroom, and the bathroom. He went toward the master bedroom. He heard a radio playing. He opened the door.

"She was sitting up in the bed. She had the light on next to her. The radio was going and she was reading a magazine with her glasses on. She looked at me and saw that I had the Luger in my hand. I said 'Turn your head so you don't see me.'

"She turned her head and took off her glasses. So she would relax and wouldn't be so tense, I said, 'All I want in your money and you won't get hurt. Where is the money kept in the house?' She said the dresser. I instructed her to lie down on the bed with her face down.

"When she did that, I put the gun away in my right overcoat pocket. I took out the hose and with both hands put it crossways on her skull, and then I reached up and hit her as hard as I could at the base of the skull.

"I laid the hose on the bed, pulled back the covers, and took off her nightie. I kept the nightie in my left hand and picked up the hose with my right, and carried her to the bathroom. I laid her down in the tub in a seated position. I took my hands and pushed her down in the water that was in the tub. I pushed her chest down so her head was under water.

"She came to. With the surgical gloves and the wet water and everything, she slipped out of my grasp. She managed to get out of the tub, so I knew I had trouble, and I was instructed either way, so I went to pull the gun out. I had to hold the overcoat with my left hand and reach in with my right hand to get it.

"She ran out of the bathroom and down the hallway to the master bedroom. I pushed the safety off the gun, went down to the end of the hallway to the southwest corner bedroom. I went in, pulled back the bedspread--the bed was made--to get a pillow. I folded the pillow in my left hand, put the gun in it and went into the master bedroom.

"She was there putting on her bathrobe. I was right close to her. I pointed the gun at her. She said, 'Don't do this. My husband is a criminal lawyer. He'll protect you from the police.' I didn't say anything. I pulled the trigger.

"Nothing happened. Things started moving fast. I dropped the pillow and started to hit the gun with my left hand. She started to come my way and tried to get past me. I hit her with the butt of the pistol. She fell and got back up. When I was ejecting the shell out of the chamber and putting another shell into the Lugar, she got past me and ran down the hallway and down the stairway.

"I followed her. I was ten or fifteen feet behind her. She went to the front door. She managed to get the door open as far as the chain lock would let it open. She screamed. I got the door closed and pulled her away from it.

"I started hitting her with the butt of the Lugar. She took off her diamond ring and said, 'Here, take this.' I dropped it to the floor. I hit her again and drove her to her knees. She said, 'Oh, God help me.'"

Anderson struck Carol Thompson in the head and she fell to the floor. As she lay prone, he rained blow after blow to her head. The blows were so hard they shattered the plastic grips on the pistol and bent the trigger guard. Blood was streaming down her face and dripping onto the floor as Anderson hit her again and again and again, at least twenty five times. She pleaded with him to stop. She lost consciousness.

"I went to the kitchen and opened several drawers. I took out a butcher knife. I felt of it and laid it back down. I took a paring knife out of the drawer and took it back to the living room and stabbed Mrs. Thomson in the throat. Three times. The knife broke off. Just the blade was sticking out of her neck.

"I thought Mrs. Thompson was dead or dying so that she wouldn't get up again. I went back to the master bedroom. I knew the drowning was bungled, so the next best thing I thought I could do was make it look like a burglary. I pulled out a chest of drawers and took everything and scattered it like I had been going through the drawers for something."

Anderson went into the bathroom to wash off the blood. Over the sound of running water, he heard a door slam. He ran down the stairs. His victim was gone. He walked to his car and drove home.

When the doorbell rang at the house of Harry Nelson and his wife a couple doors down the street, Mrs. Nelson was watching the morning news. When she opened the door she did not realize at first that it was Carol Thompson. The figure was covered in blood and clutching her neck where a blade protruded. She struggled to talk but her words were unintelligible. Mrs. Nelson covered her with a blanket. Carol Thompson was taken to Ancker Hospital (a block from where I grew up). Mr. Thompson was notified at his office of what had occurred. Carol Thompson went into deep shock and again lost consciousness. She was pronounced dead at 12:58 p.m. The children were called to the office at school.

So that's what happened that day. What am I left with after all of this, the recollection, the associations, the book, this writing?

I'm left with a churning stomach and a lump in my throat. Reading the transcript of Anderson's testimony and just now writing out this account has left me physically upset, shaken, and saddened, even though these events are so far in the distant past. That this young woman went through this unspeakable savagery and lost her life so suddenly and so senselessly, and for her husband to have done this to her, his wife, the mother of his children, and for Anderson to have committed this horrific act, and for the children to have lost their mother this way, and forever--this time it is real for me. It had little reality back then--organically, emotionally, intellectually, in any way. For that matter, little or nothing was real to me when I was young, so that experience was no exception, even as heightened as it was.

I'm much more in contact with the world these years, including the inner reality of my own being; this recollection has brought that home to me. I'm much more here, now, in this place, a part of this context. I'm present, awake, so much more than I was. And that's good; I'm gratified by this difference in me. I've worked hard to be the way I am now, alert, not deadened, and life is so much better because of it. But this positive change has come at a price, because much of life hurts, even in the best of lives, and being detached and numbed and minimally involved has its advantages in that regard. It insulates you from pain, and it keeps you safe, or at least safer, and less afraid, or so it seems. But that price is worth paying, because being disconnected from pain and negation and threat and fear (or at least suppressing it some) also keeps you disconnected from joy and love and self-expression and accomplishment and gratification and happiness and peace. In whatever time I have left on this earth I want to be as fully present as I can manage given my capabilities and limitations. I want to have the courage to be look directly at my external and internal realities, and for me, given where I'm come from, my childhood experiences included, that does take courage. I don't want to miss any more of life. I need to continue to expel anything and anybody that keeps me alienated, armored, going through the motions. I am committed to being as truly alive as I can be, to live as fully as I can and publicly (no hiding), while I still have the gift of existence.

The philosopher Hanna Arendt's "banality of evil" thesis has come to mind. Arendt posited that evil is most often not committed by raging fanatics and sociopaths--devils incarnate, different in kind from the rest of us, a flawed few--but rather by ordinary, run-of-the-mill people who accept uncritically the premises in their circumstances. Everyday people are capable of evil; it's in their repertoire, so to speak, if their contexts--predominant assumptions and values, rewards and punishments--call it out in them. Arendt was referring to historical evil, the Nazi atrocities in particular, but I've related her concept to personal, private evil. Indeed, Anderson came off in appearance and manner as ordinary, banal. His ordinariness and banality is what made his polite, affectless, matter-of-fact recitation of what he had agreed to do, and then did do, particularly unsettling to hear back then. And Thompson looked so ordinary that day. Fair to say, this day in the courtroom was my encounter with the banality of evil.

I taught for a time in a juvenile correctional facility, adolescent boys. Most of them looked and sounded very ordinary, banal, but I knew from my up-close experience with them what they were capable of doing. I would see some of them, after they were released, walking along the main street in downtown Burlington, Vermont, where I live. The others on the street, individuals and couples and families walking along looking in the store windows and having lunch in sidewalk cafes, had no reason to take note of these young men, but there were beasts among them, who, if the circumstances prompted, would have injured them, even snuffed out their lives. We need to realize that we conduct our lives in the midst of potential violence and harm.

Short of outright evil, ordinary, typical, basically decent people, and I'm talking about most people here, have it in them to be markedly, unconscionably, cruel and hurtful to others of their kind--slights, gossip, exclusion, personal attack, vengeance, passive aggression, ganging up, ambushing, economic reprisal, and so on. It has taken me a long time, too long, to come to grips with this reality about "good folks." I have lived my life naively, I see now, believing that people are good, and that if anybody, or any group, came after me there must have been some misunderstanding, or that I was at fault somehow, and if I would just straighten myself out everything would be fine. I've concluded that no matter how good I am, how

good you are, there are a lot of people out there that will hurt us if it is to their least advantage.

We are zebras amid lions, except the lions appear to be other zebras. You and I need to recognize that, and we need to protect ourselves the best we can. And what does that involve? Locked doors, home security systems, guns. Awareness, caution, vigilance. The police didn't get there in time to save Carol Thompson and they won't get there in time to save you and me. As for the day-to-day cruelty, bordering on viciousness at times, that we almost certainly will have to confront in our social and work lives--especially if we are isolated or perceived as different or off-base--we need to get as savvy and strong and tough and formidable as we can in order to prevent it from happening and to take it on effectively when it does. Don't be perceived as vulnerable and defenseless if you can help it. Don't be weak. The human being is a pack animal, a predator. A good bit of my writing for this site, I'm coming to realize, addresses this reality.

This Anderson memory has underscored for me how different I am now from how I was back then. I was young then, and now I am old. I had a long future then; now I don't. My father died within months of the Thompson trial. My sister died twenty years after it, killed in car accident. My brother and I are even more distant from one another than we were then. My wife has gone through two marriages since me. I am estranged from my son, and a second son. I live on the east coast. I am virtually deaf. I probably wouldn't be able to hear court testimony now. I have clear priorities and goals grounded in a critical understanding of myself and my situation. I have a place in the scheme of things. I have a home of my own. I do work that reflects my highest values. Back then, I wouldn't have known to even contemplate that, much less strive for it. I have a good measure of honor and quality in my life now; they were not even ideals back then. I have a young daughter that is the light of my life. I'm so incredibly thankful that I've had a second chance to get parenting right.

But at the same time I'm different, I'm not different. The person looking out at the world at the Thompson trial is the same one that is typing these words a half century later. It's the same me -- the same entity, the same core awareness, the same consciousness

--thinking and feeling and deciding and acting now as did then. The me that teaches college students now is the same me that was in that courtroom, and in the fifth grade, and in the high school band, and at Fort Lewis Washington, and in theater productions (no matter what role you have in a play it is still you doing it, that never-changing you). Our outward appearance changes--don't I know, I'm struck by the incredibly old person looking back at me in the mirror--and what we know and do changes, and our circumstance changes, but we are the same person now as we were at sixteen and twenty-three and thirty-six. It's always us, from our first conscious moment, and understanding ourselves and how we conduct our lives includes taking that into account. We are never brand new.

Similarly, everything that has happened to us, or at least how we interpreted it, no matter how long ago it was, is still part of us, now, here. The person that saw Randall and Segell--and really, everyone--as being inside and me being outside, still exists, is still a part of my being, despite all that has gone on in my life since, including everything contradictory to that self-perception. The person that was "dug up" only because Raul Piersdorf's wife had died and they needed somebody, anybody, to cover for him, and that spent five years supervising a high school lunchroom, he's still part of the organism that now goes by the name of Robert S. Griffin. The person who thought he mattered for nothing in the eyes of the world and was neither needed nor wanted, and is fundamentally bad, wrong, off-base, and can never change that basic reality about himself no matter what he does, is still here. The person that cried alone and afraid in his bedroom at six while his parents screamed at each other and pushed and shoved and threatened and slammed doors and stormed out of the house seemingly forever amid pleas not to leave--he's still here, this instant.

None of us leaves our past behind, not really, not completely. What has happened to us, what we have been told about ourselves, both good and bad, particularly when we are young and less able to fend it off or explain it away or transform it, remains within us as organic, implicit, tacit, preconscious aspects of our being all of our days. Our challenge is to take charge of our lives and live them well, fully, honorably, and be good for others, no matter what has happened to us and what residue of that remains within us.

And last, this recollection has brought up thoughts about time. That day in the courtroom happened almost a half century ago, that was me, and I'm still alive, and I have my health, and I'm still working. How grateful I am for that. We have a finite amount of time in our lives, although we are never sure how much it is. I feel so fortunate that I've had seven decades of time and still counting. We spend our time as we do, and then we have a bit less of it, it's never replenished. What happens happens for all time--that day at the Thompson trial was as it was--it's one time through, no do-overs. And whatever we *do*, we *don't do* everything other thing that was possible to do at that time. That is to say, there was an *opportunity cost* for me of going to the Thompson trial: everything else that I could have done during those hours. And that is true at every period of time in one's life. I need to keep in mind that I am typing these words instead of everything else I could be doing at this moment. This is how I am using this portion of my allotted time in life. And indeed, in my considered judgment given my priorities and goals at present, typing these words is the best use of my time right now.

The Anderson testimony happened once as it did; that time is past forever, nothing will bring it back, nothing will change it. After the Anderson testimony, a next thing happened. How I chose that next thing, or fell into it, however it happened, and my experience of it, and my interpretation of it, and its consequences for me, were affected by what had occurred at the trial that day and the significance I gave it, as well as everything that had proceeded that occasion in my life; the events of our life are not self-contained episodes. And then, after that, a next thing happened, and a next, and a next and a next and a next, and on and on and on, and here I am on a Thursday afternoon writing this thought. And after I post this I will do something else, and something else, and something else, until time will have run out for me--I will have spent it all. Life comes down to spending time.

I've read, and now I am experiencing, that the quality of the last stage of life is very much contingent on our own assessment of how wisely we have spent the time available to us. If, when time has about run out, we look back on our life and conclude that we have spent our time well--or at least did the best we could to spend it well--whatever the particulars in our circumstance at the moment, and however the world has assessed what we've done, we have a

pervasive sense of satisfaction, gratitude, peace. But if, on the other hand, we reflect back on our life and decide that we have wasted, or misspent, our time, we experience regret, despair, sadness. As we go through life, we need to keep in mind that we are doing things once and forever, and for better or worse; and that if we live long enough, if life isn't cut short, as it was for my sister, and for my mother, near the end of our life we will take a reckoning: how'd I do with my time on this earth. At the end, it is going to be about what we think of ourselves, not what others think of us. If we haven't spent our time responsibly and honorably in our own eyes, and displayed integrity and courage--at least characteristically, we don't need to be perfect--no beach houses and award dinners will cover for it.

In the last thought before this one for this site, I wrote about the death of a prominent musician from the 1930s and '40s named Artie Shaw. The epitaph on Shaw's gravestone reads, "He did the best he could with the materials at hand." I've concluded that, within reason, I've done the best I could with the materials at hand. And that has left me with self-respect and self-approval and a quiet, peaceful feeling of "Yes" about what I have done with my life, with my time. People who negatively criticize me, particularly with reference to my writing in recent years, and think their assessment matters to me, don't get it. What matters to me is that I approve of how I have used my time on this earth, and am using it. And I do.

Being in the last stage of life does not mean that life is over. I still have time to spend, and I'll spend what's left of my time as wisely and decently as I can. Part of that will be directed at improving my materials at hand, as it were, in order to raise the ceiling of what I can experience and accomplish: I'll work on getting as healthy and clear and efficacious as I'm capable of being, and getting into the richest, most encouraging, most supportive contexts available to me. I'll accrue the best memories possible until my allotment of time runs out.

* The book is Donald John Giese, *The Carol Thompson Murder Case* (New York: Scope Reports, 1969).

