

On Cocoons and Butterflies
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Dear Jack--

Give my regards to Watson. Next time I get to the Twin Cities it would be great for the three of us to get together. I haven't seen him since high school. I remember the birthday parties I went to at his house that his mother so lovingly arranged, the gooey home-made cake and presents and everything--Watson and I were about seven or eight, something like that, can't remember whether you were there or not.

What an athlete he was. I remember watching the Madison High School football practices, and Watson's arm was so good that to work on punt returns the coaches would have him simulate punts by throwing the ball way high in the air about fifty yards down the field. And those were the days of the big fat ball, not today's little kiddie ball. I was in awe. He could have been a big time quarterback in college if he hadn't decided to concentrate on baseball.

If you contact Watson, see if he remembers when he and I, we were about ten, tried to figure out the answer to a grammatical problem, although we wouldn't have known to call it that. The problem was, Which is correct, "you guys" or "youse guys?" Is it, What are you guys doing on Saturday? or What are youse guys doing on Saturday? At first the answer seemed obvious to us: you guys. What are you guys doing? But when we thought about it, since guys was plural--I think we knew the word plural--it might just be proper to match guys up with the plural form of you, which is youse. So maybe it should be "youse guys." Or is it "you guys"? Watson and I went back and forth. We were sincerely engaged with this problem. Finally we agreed on the answer: it is optional. You guys, youse guys, both are correct. Either way. You were free to go whichever way you want with it. I swear this happened. I can't be imagining this. Check it out with him.

Watson was on the radio show you said you and I were on together. I can't remember what the show was called either. It was in the Hamm Building downtown, WMIN, Stuart Lindmann I think was the announcer's name. It was musical chairs--on the radio, the

listener had to imagine what was going on--and the child that didn't get a seat would have to answer a question, and if you got it right you could stay in the game and if you got it wrong you were out. And they kept doing that until there was a winner, and I believe Watson won. A tick scandalous as I think about it now, the show gave us kids the questions and answers ahead of time on cards, and we spent the week before the show memorizing the answers. When they wanted to get someone out of the game, I suppose they were watching the clock and timing it, they would throw in a ringer question, one we hadn't memorized. I got a ringer question: Who invented the wireless telegraph? I didn't have a clue. Samuel Morse. Out I went. My mother said afterwards that she suspected that our seventh grade teacher, Miss Riley, who set up our appearance on the show, told them to throw a ringer question at me so I'd lose. I didn't catch my mother's reasoning about why Miss Riley would do something like that, and, my style back then, I didn't ask.

Much less asking about anything, I didn't think about anything in those years. I was in a daze, numb. I was like a pet dog, I went where anybody that pulled my leash took me. For example, the director of the Madison High School band, Mr. Ellsworth Blood (there's a name for you) told me I ought to be playing something called a baritone horn--it's like a small tuba--which I couldn't play a lick and hadn't the slightest affinity for. But because Blood told me to do it, for all four years of high school I was in the band playing the baritone horn. I can understand why Blood thought I ought to play the thing, he was filling out his band. But what was I doing it for? And why wasn't my four year involvement in the band worth at least a comment from my parents or my much older sister and brother?

Anyway, every morning at 8:00 a.m., first hour, there I'd be on the school auditorium stage, wasting a school credit, in the last row of the band, with my baritone propped up in my lap waiting for Blood to lead us in the next song. Sitting on my left was Ronald Emerson, who also played the baritone, and far better than I could, and who was on a higher plane of existence than I was, we both understood that, with him destined for college and worldly success and me on a conveyer belt to, well, wherever. On my right playing a monstrous bass horn--it's like a great big tuba--was Stan Diedrich ("died rich," as Stan pointed out to me), who between renditions of

Souza marches would recount to me what he was taking in with his binoculars that the couple next door to his house were doing in their bedroom, which I vaguely comprehended through the gauze that separated me from the world in those years.

The damn baritone weighed about forty pounds with the case, and I remember lugging it all alone on the bus dressed in my band uniform (with of an audience of snickering riders) to go to Central high school where we played our football games and form the letter "M" along with the other losers at halftime and play the school fight song, as if anyone was watching, and it was cold out and the field was muddy. Why?

My senior year, I played a solo in the band concert, "Jupiter Polka" it was called. I didn't have the faintest notion what a polka was, and absolutely couldn't play the song, so I knew the concert wasn't going to be my finest hour. It was like I was counting off days until my public humiliation, though it didn't get to me too bad, it would just be more of the same for me. Sure enough, when I was playing my solo, as I did nine times out of ten I completely fell apart during this one particular run up the musical scale and stopped cold. I licked my lips and gathered myself and, after what must have seemed to everybody but me like an eternity of deadly silence--I was in what amounted to a vegetative state--I restarted a few notes up the line. None of the few parents who showed up (my parents didn't bother) were so tactless as to snicker at me as those bus riders did, and as the few students who bothered to glance at the band during the football games did.

One good thing did come out of playing in the band, though: the only award or acknowledgment I have received in my entire life. Maurice Henschel and I were the only two seniors in the band. Remember him? Maurice was cruelly but appropriately called "Sunfish," because head-on he looked like a, you know, a sunfish. Maurice liked to tell people, "You may be important, but I am more essential." (Say that out loud.) Anyway, there I am sitting at the awards assembly in the Madison auditorium, and to my utter amazement, Blood, in his horn rim glasses and close-cropped-on-the-sides haircut and in his tie and shirt outfit, no sport coat, announced that I had been--meaning he had--co-awarded the band award to me and Maurice Henschel. Maurice and I came up on stage and collected our awards. Snickers in the background.

Remember Tom Kiesler? Madison maybe, must have been. Did

you know him? I remember his mother cooked hot dogs at the Saint Paul Saints minor league baseball games, really good hotdogs, twenty-five cents I think they were. Tom was wonderfully, and remarkably, simple-minded. I don't mean he was dumb, I'm sure he wasn't. He was just sort of blissfully uncomplicated. Cheerful. Positive. Innocuous. There wasn't a dark or cynical bone in Tom's body. He was kind of like the Chauncey Gardner character in Jerzy Kosinski's book, the one that was later made into a film, *Being There*.

Tom was a batboy and then a clubhouse boy with the Saints. He considered it a high honor--I remember him telling me this--to pick up the dirty uniforms, socks, and jock straps of the ballplayers in the locker room. I remember thinking, yes, for sure, that is indeed a high honor, and wondering, as much as I was capable of wondering, which was very little, why I couldn't find something that noble to do with my life. I think Tom wound up being a clubhouse attendant and equipment manager for almost forty years with the Minnesota Twins baseball team.

I don't mean to be patronizing Tom. I just Googled him and found his bio with a picture. He seems to have done just fine in his life. The bio recounted all the star Twins players over the years Tom has known, and how important his work was to everybody. And how now he's a beloved grandfather, and sits on the bench in uniform as a kind of honorary coach for the Northbriar College baseball team. The bio had a picture of Tom in his Northbriar baseball cap looking just as innocent and pure as I knew him way back when. Although he sure has put on weight--catch the bloated face in this link, makes the baseball cap look tiny. But except for that, it's remarkably the same face I remember. Note how Tom has given attention to rounding the bill of the cap into a tight circle around his eyes just like we used to do it.

Thinking and reading about Tom just now, I thought about life being fleeting, and that it doesn't really make any difference in the grand scheme of things whether we catch on to what is happening, or do anything in particular, or leave our cozy cocoons; Tom Kiesler's life seems to demonstrate that you can just stay nestled in until you die. I realize I am probably projecting things onto Tom that I shouldn't be, but it's just that I remember him being the most sincere, trusting, unencumbered, comfortable, and contented person imaginable. No edges: nothing to cut your finger on with Tom, and Tom wasn't about to cut his own finger. Looking at this, albeit

inflated, face in the baseball a half century later in the bio pic, it is the very same agreeable person looking out at the world, or so it appears.

I've spent my adult life trying to get a handle on things, figure things out, become something, make something big happen, and for what? What compels me? Why didn't I--why don't I--just let go? Why don't I eat my beloved big scoop Fritos and simply buy bigger size pants when I need them? What am I trying to prove? Why don't I watch NFL games from morning to bedtime on Sundays? Why can't I stay away from giving voice to white people and their concerns when I know I'm not supposed to be doing that? What am I doing out here in Vermont almost 70 years old as a university professor playing my life to an indifferent audience that every once in while turns nasty? When Tom Kiesler dies people will cry real tears in Saint Paul. If I die over the weekend in Burlington, nobody will find me for days.

I took about a half hour just now over a cup of coffee thinking about the questions I raised in this last paragraph and some answers are coming to me, which I guess I sort of knew but not really. The answers are simple ones, ones that should have been obvious all along to me but nevertheless weren't, or at least to a large extent they weren't, or weren't as clear as they are now writing this.

I've pushed on the edges all of my adult life and lived with the consequences of that because, simply, I'm not Watson and Tom Kiesler, and that's what I do, that's me. I'm who I am and I'm a product of where I came from, and I have my path to walk in life and Watson and Tom have theirs, and you have yours. I never had other kids over for my birthday, I couldn't throw a football from here to there, I didn't know you from youse (or at least thought I didn't; I just now looked it up and found that youse is a plural found in Australia, England, Ireland, Scotland, and parts of the U.S. and Canada), I didn't win on the radio show, I played in the band because somebody told me to, I was as lost and disconnected as a human being could possibly be, and I'm just not the kind of person that anyone except Ellsworth Blood that one time would ever think of singling out for anything. If people notice me at all, more than a few of them have a strong desire to put me in my place. As much as I might want to do it, I can't do something that everyone likes and admires--a loyal equipment manager, or a teacher that tells students what they want to hear--if it doesn't reflect my unique nature.

That's just not in the cards for me. The best thing I can do, it has dawned on me clearer now than ever, is play the hand I've been dealt in life the very best I can for as long as I'm alive. And to love the game that's on my table, to embrace it.

I've told myself the last couple of years that it's just been the last decade or so that I have been on my true path in life, but it's hitting me that without being aware of it, or at least fully aware of it, I've been on my true path ever since I left high school. An insistent inner impulse to become who I truly am has compelled me over the span of my adult life--I felt it, it was an organic reality. I've done the best I knew how at any particular time to live in alignment with it. Given how far back I was when I started out, I've been fortunate enough to have had enough years of life--my dear friend Danny Cashill died so young--for this impulse, this urge, along with my rational mind and whatever character I possess, to propel me to a very good destination: myself.

I have used the various contexts I've been in in my life to work on my life's project of self-realization and self-manifestation: the army at just turned seventeen; attending the university, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels; the secondary school teaching; Mary and the boys, even as I have great regret regarding them; the university professorship; the theater and dance involvements; Susan and Karen; Raymond North, whose support and friendship I miss very much; the heart attack; the contact with William Pierce; the sports and teaching books and the books and articles on race; the deafness; the seemingly sudden onset of old age and the sobering, and surprisingly freeing, realization that time is short; this web site, which calls me out like nothing ever has; and now the two wonderful people that have come into my life.

I realize nearing the end that I've been responsible to the precious gift of life I have been given. I'm proud of how I never quit trying to make something worthwhile out of myself no matter what was going on. That gives me happiness in the sense of a pervasive feeling of satisfaction and even peace amid all the jitters and sleepless nights. Even though all of it wasn't right, I've done all right. I won't eat those Fritos, or watch those ballgames, or go silent about the wellbeing and fate of white people, and I won't retire from my university work and get a dog and start a garden, at least not this year or next. I'm really OK being as isolated as I am and going home to an empty house right after I finish writing this message in

the office, and with being as disvalued in my world as I am; that's fitting for me now, here. It's me. It's who I am. The best thing I can do with my life is be me, this one-of-a-kind, never-replicable individual human being, and I'm doing that, and it's getting clear that I have been doing that all along, good for me. I love my little daughter dearly, and her mother too. I'll see them next week. I can't wait. It's fine. It's fine. I'm a butterfly.

I'll look to hear from you, Jack. Give my best wishes to Meg.

Your friend,
Robert